



BOOK
FOUR



**BEAUTIFULLY
COMPLICATED**

MICHELE LENARD

Beautifully Complicated

A Forbidden MM Romance

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CMFR

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Prologue - Aiden

I can still hear voices after hanging up the phone, but they're muted compared to what passes for normal volume in this house. Whoever's talking clearly doesn't want to be overheard, and I'd like to respect that, but I'd also like to know who's in the house with me when it's supposed to be empty.

Treading softly, I make my way from the kitchen to the living room, where I have a clear view of the foyer. Damien, who I thought left a few minutes ago, is standing less than a foot away from Bennet, who must've come in while I was talking to my mother.

It looks like they're in the middle of a heated conversation, which isn't unusual for those two, but their proximity to one another is. I mean, they're practically breathing each other's air, and since Bennet can't stand Damien, that's pretty odd.

I side-step behind the wall so I'm out of view and listen.

"I've got four pages of math that'll probably take me at least two hours." Bennet slouches against the wall with a heavy sigh. "And that's on top of economics. Is ten too late?" His voice drops as if he's afraid of being overheard.

“You’ve got a key for a reason,” Damien says.

Bennet has a key? To Damien’s? Since when?

I poke my head around the corner just in time to see Bennet reach for Damien’s coat, yanking him close enough that their lips meet in a brief yet searing kiss.

My stomach drops to the floor.

“What’s this for?” Damien sighs into Bennet’s mouth, returning the kiss.

“You’re sexy as fuck in this hat.” The fingers of Bennet’s right hand toy with the strands of hair sticking out near Damien’s ear.

“You complain about this hat every time I wear it during workouts.”

“Because you look sexy as fuck in it and running with a boner is torture.” Bennet nips at his bottom lip before pulling it into his mouth.

“But you’re gonna force me to walk home with one?” Damien’s tongue licks against Bennet’s.

“I’ll take care of it later.” Bennet pushes his way into Damien’s mouth one last time before giving him a slow, sweet peck on the lips. Then he smacks Damien’s ass. “Get out of here so I can start my homework.”

“Later.” Damien gives Bennet a final kiss and jogs out the front door.

I forget I’m supposed to be hiding until Bennet turns around and spots me, the dopey smile on his face morphing into a deer-in-the-headlights expression.

“Oh, uh. Hey.” He rubs the back of his neck nervously, clearly wondering if there’s any chance I didn’t just see that.

I gape at him, my supposedly straight roommate, and blink repeatedly. “Are you...*bi*?”

Bennet’s face turns uncharacteristically pink. “Apparently.”

“Since when?”

“Since my dick decided to take an interest in that fucker.” He jerks his head to the door Damien just walked through.

“I thought you hated him?” Those two have been rivals for years, their competitive natures so ingrained Bennet damn near banned him from the house when Damien first transferred here. And on the rare occasions Damien’s come here to study with me, I thought for sure Bennet would stroke out.

“Trust me, I want to.” Bennet sighs. “My cock doesn’t though. Damn thing perks up every time he looks at me. It’s annoying as fuck.”

I think that’s supposed to be a joke, but my brain can’t process humor right now. It’s too stuck on shock.

“I’m still not following this. Isn’t Damien straight? You said he stole your high school girlfriend.”

“Yeah, about that.” Bennet chuckles. “Turns out he was trying to show me she wasn’t girlfriend material or something. His method was shit, but I get what he was trying to do. Probably one of those spectrum things where it made sense in his head even though it was fucked up. I’m pretty sure you’re right about that, by the way,” he rambles. “I haven’t said anything to him, but I’ve been paying attention, and I think you’re right about how he was never trying to bait me. He just said what came to mind.”

“You don’t think Damien is trying to bait you because of what *I* said?” I point to my chest, wondering if that offhand comment about Bennet needing to be mindful of his reaction to Damien since I suspected he was on the spectrum was the first domino leading to the scene I just witnessed. “And now you’re dating?”

“Not dating.” Bennet shakes his head firmly. “I can’t... I’m not...”

“Damien said you have a key to his place.”

Bennet worries his lip, as if he’s debating how to answer. “Yeah—” he nods slowly “—for discretion.”

“Damien’s in the closet?”

“Not him. Me.”

My eyes flare wide. “You? You live with five gay guys and you’re in the closet? Who exactly are you hiding from, cause it’s sure as shit not us, right?”

I’m expecting him to spew out a correction. Or apologize for the misunderstanding. What I’m not expecting is his total silence, or for the biggest, strongest man I know to visibly shrink before me.

“You hid your sexuality from *me*?” My voice cracks on the last word.

“I wasn’t hiding. I didn’t think I liked guys. I mean, I don’t —” Bennet shrugs helplessly “—except him for some reason.”

Given what I witnessed, his words shouldn’t hurt more than the image seared into my brain. But the shock of that scene must be wearing off, because that confession feels like a knife sinking into my chest, one agonizing inch at a time.

“You still kept it a secret. Why?” I blink furiously, hoping to stave off the looming tears.

Bennet can either see the pain in my eyes or sense it in my voice, rushing to confess a family history of homophobia I never knew existed, and his own fears about a future NFL career as a bisexual man. But I can tell from his tone that he’s confessing as my best friend, believing my pain is a result of some platonic betrayal for keeping secrets rather than heartbreak.

He still has no idea how I really feel.

I can’t decide if I should be grateful for that or not.

On the one hand, my pride is intact, and if I’m careful, he’ll never know I’ve been in love with him since freshman year, when we bonded over trying to make our dads proud by following in their footsteps and joining a fraternity neither of us had an interest in being part of. On the other, I’m furious.

Furious that I respected a sexual boundary that wasn’t real. That he’s pushing that boundary with another man. That he

never has, and never will, see me as anything other than a friend.

A friend he's currently confessing his secrets to and expecting to receive advice in return.

"I get hiding from your dad," I say softly from my spot on the floor next to Bennet, where we both sunk to while he revealed the truth about his father's homophobia. "But two of your openly gay roommates are gunning for the NFL, and there doesn't seem to be any backlash against them."

"They've got two more years until they hit the draft, and honestly, they've got more talent than me. Their skill might make people turn a blind eye to their sexuality, but I'm not sure my skill will open the same doors for me. And like I said, this thing with Damien is... We're not boyfriends. There's no reason to draw attention to something that has an end date." Bennet rubs absently at his chest.

"And when is that?"

"I..." He continues to press at his breastbone, clearing his throat before trying to speak, though no words actually come out.

"Does Damien know it has an end date?" I ask, trying not to sound hopeful, and feeling like shit that I am.

Damien's a good guy. I genuinely like him. I genuinely want to hate him for his relationship with Bennet, but it's not Damien's fault I never came clean about my feelings.

"Damien knows I'm not planning to come out of the closet," Bennet says softly.

"That's not the same thing."

"Isn't it?" He continues to rub his chest, almost as if he's got heartburn. "Whether it's because I'm not planning to come out or because both of us want to go to the NFL, there's no future here. It's just sex. That's why we're keeping it a secret."

"Jesus, Bennet. Do you really not see it?"

"See what?"

I take a little satisfaction knowing I'm not the only thing Bennet's blind to, but it's short-lived. Though it literally pains me to point it out, Damien deserves better than secret boyfriend status, and based on what I saw between those two, it's far more than that.

"Fuck buddies don't usually steal kisses when they think no one's looking."

"We didn't..." The protest dies on Bennet's lips before he can get the words out, and just as he realizes what he's been blind to when it comes to Damien, so do I.

"Fuck, I should've seen this coming." I thunk my head against the wall with a groan. "The tension between you two never did strike me as actual hate. I just never let myself consider it might be sexual."

"Why would you? I didn't consider that either until it just... happened."

My eyes fall shut with a heavy sigh. "Oh my God. This whole time I thought I was helping you tolerate each other, not..."

I did this. I helped them see each other as more than rivals. I

"Not what?"

"I—" I shake my head firmly, halting my own confession in its tracks. "It doesn't matter. It's just a bit of a shock that you're... I never really saw that coming and I... I need to finish my homework."

I can't do this. I can't sit here any longer and listen to him talk about another man. One I handed him on a silver platter when I could've been that man if I'd been brave enough to try.

"Right now?" Bennet's brows draw together as he watches me pop up like the floor is on fire. "We aren't gonna finish talking?"

"It's... Yeah, I've got a ton of shit to do. And it sounds like you do too if you want to get to Damien's later. I... I won't say

anything so you can—” I wave my hand aimlessly “—do whatever. I won’t say anything.”

I’m half-expecting him to come after me, and if he does, I’ll have no explanation for the tears streaming down my face. When the knock doesn’t come, I’m tempted to storm into his room and call him out for being too focused on getting to his boyfriend’s to check on me, his best friend.

But I don’t.

I quietly sob into my pillow, mourning what I’ll never have. Wondering why he chose Damien when I’ve been here all along.

Chapter One

Aiden

ONE MONTH LATER

The tiny rainbow flag in the window snags my attention, and before I've consciously decided to step inside my hand is reaching for the door. My body must realize there's no hope of sleep after such a stimulating night, and now that my brain has caught up, it agrees.

A few customers glance my way when the cool evening air follows me inside, but they go back to their drinks and conversations, paying me no mind. That deflates me a little—I wouldn't decline some conversation—but I didn't come here for a hookup either, just a drink in a friendly environment, and if that came with some light flirting, I wouldn't object.

My obliterated heart isn't ready for anything serious, but as the only single guy in our house, it is a little lonely.

Taking a seat at the mahogany bar, I order a whiskey, sipping on it as I reflect on my evening.

Kier Caldwell is the most fascinating man on the planet.

I'm probably one of few college students who think so seeing as how he's not a famous athlete or a rockstar or an actor, but his mind is nothing short of genius, and—if I'm being shallow—he's pretty easy on the eyes too.

His dark hair and bright eyes aren't nearly as Irish-looking as you'd expect given his name, and there's no trace of an accent that I can tell, but he's got the beauty, the brains, and the most mesmerizing voice I've ever heard. Listening to him speak is so far the highlight of my young life. All twenty-two years of it.

The things he's doing with AI to improve people's lives is nothing short of revolutionary. I'm not talking about the *cheat on your homework* kind of improvement using programs that scrape copyright material to help people cut corners. I'm talking about innovative applications that will actually improve quality of life.

Keir is spearheading the movement to put AI in prosthetics to adjust and optimize their use. No more antiquated plastics that don't have any function. No more fumbling limbs that are just as likely to frustrate as help. No more being held back because your artificial limbs can't do what your real limbs could.

Okay, maybe that's still in process, but Kier is getting us closer to that point. I mean, already AI sensors in prosthetics can interpret the electrical signals from the brain, helping those artificial limbs react to what you want them to do. But now he wants to combine nanotechnology with AI.

Imagine the biosensing nature of limbs made of nanomaterials combined with the sensory capabilities of AI powered prosthetics. Simply put, it'd be like replacing a limb with another limb!

I'm practically vibrating with the possibilities of it all.

When I decided to study computer science, I dreamed of doing something that would make a difference, although I sort of thought that would be more along the lines of helping medical professionals identify and treat diseases. Then I heard about how there was an initiative to put AI into prosthetic limbs, the ultimate goal being to get people back to the same standard of living they had before, and I quickly switched focus.

I've loved every second of my studies, learning how to combine hardware and software in a way that can improve one's quality of life, but the idea that you could essentially mimic a real limb with a prosthetic one using nanotechnology and AI... My nerd brain is on overdrive.

Kier is so forward-thinking. So brilliant. Hearing him speak was a bucket-list item, though now I'm not sure once is enough. He's just so...*inspiring*.

Not for the first time, I wish I had someone I could talk to about this. Someone who could understand what I'm saying, which sadly, most of my friends don't. I have to simplify everything to the most basic of ideas and concepts, and even then I usually have to resort to sci-fi comparisons before my friends truly comprehend my excitement.

I once described what Kier's doing as building a real-life version of Luke Skywalker's bionic arm when Bennet and I...

Shit. What was that, a whole thirty minutes without thinking of him?

I take a larger than recommended sip of whiskey, wiping my mouth with the back of my wrist after I nearly choke on it.

Nope. Not going there. No thinking about Bennet when I'm as close to happy as I've been since that fateful day when I caught him kissing his then-secret boyfriend.

Yeah, right. When has telling yourself not to think of him ever worked?

I wish it were that easy. That I could tell my mind not to dwell on Bennet as if my brain was some form of AI that I could program to ignore that particular data point.

Even if I could purge thoughts of him, I'm not sure I'd want to. Despite the fact he—unknowingly—broke my heart, there are years of good memories between us. Memories of the bond that formed when we begrudgingly pledged ourselves to Sigma Rho to follow our fathers' legacies. Memories of pranks and parties while living in the frat house. Memories of quiet evenings playing video games or watching movies when

neither of us had the energy to be social; him because of football and me because of my studies.

To this day, I'm fairly certain it was his influence that led our fraternity brothers to accept me unconditionally, since lord knows a gay nerd isn't a sought-after type of member. And even though they had to offer me a place because of my father, chances are without Bennet's influence I might've received more than my fair share of hazing.

But Bennet never saw a gay nerd when he looked at me. He just saw...me. And being the charismatic guy he is, the simple act of accepting me for me enabled others to do the same. I actually have good friends in the frat, which I attribute to Bennet. He gave me the confidence to be who I am without reservation, and I'm as comfortable in my own skin as I've ever been thanks to him.

I'm also heartbroken or whatever, but I might bear some responsibility for that.

Taking another, normal-sized, sip, I reflect on where I might've gone wrong, and what I could've done differently.

Ignoring his boundaries is a hard no—I'd never do that to anyone—but maybe if I'd been paying closer attention, I'd have realized those boundaries had changed. I'd have picked up on the fact he was starting to ask questions, and been there to help him find answers.

Of course, he didn't start asking questions until Damien came along, so maybe Bennet would still be straight if Damien hadn't challenged that belief. Maybe things would be just as they always were, me hiding my feelings and pretending I wasn't interested and him being totally oblivious to that dormant part of himself.

But it's not dormant anymore, so it's hard to keep my mind from wandering to that persistent question, why Damien? Why not me? And since it's not me, can we even be friends anymore?

Best friend was a hard enough role to play when I thought his sexuality was the roadblock to my feelings, but best friend

while he's got a boyfriend? Can I even hang out with the two of them while they're together?

So far, I've been able to avoid that situation. Careful planning, and a few sudden and demanding school projects that may or may not be real, have given me the excuse to be scarce. That won't last forever though.

Dammit, why did Bennet have to fall for a guy I actually like? Avoiding them would be so much easier if I didn't like the man in my best friend's life.

A better question is why I never picked up on the fact that Bennet was confused about his sexuality. I'm not saying I should've been looking for cracks in the straight persona, but I find it hard to believe that he could go through that type of identity crisis without any outward signs. Why didn't I see them? Is it because I took him at face value that he was straight? Should I have asked how he knew that about himself?

Jesus Aiden, get a grip.

I hate when people ask how I know I'm gay, so I could never be that ignorant in return. And I damn sure don't want to be thought of as the guy who creeps on straight men. But maybe if I'm interested in someone, I should just say it. What's the worst that could happen, they say they want to be friends?

Instead of waiting around for people to notice me I should be bold. Take chances. Put myself out there like the confident guy I *can* be.

Sort of like Kier is on stage.

I take another sip of my drink. *That's one way to get off the Bennet spiral.*

Not that I've got a new crush or anything, although Kier is a captivating man, but he's totally unattainable. Doesn't even know I exist.

Bennet was unattainable too.

That thought nearly has me snorting whiskey all over the bar, earning me a wary glance from the bartender, but I can't help that the irony is priceless enough to have me spewing my drink.

Not that Kier is the straight kind of unattainable—I think I read somewhere he's actually gay—but he's a renowned scholar in the AI/prosthetic space, and we're only in the same city because he's on a book tour. He's completely out of reach.

A guy can dream though.

About a man who can capture a room's attention just by walking into it. Whose velvety voice can inspire and excite while it seems to wrap you in a warm blanket. Whose penetrating blue eyes can appear to see into your soul, making it seem like he's speaking directly to you rather than an auditorium full of people.

Yes, that last part seemed to happen during his lecture tonight. Logically, I know that's just my imagination running wild, but believing for even a second that Kier saw me out of all the people in the crowd is a thought I'm going to let myself indulge in. A little ego boost after heartbreak if you will. I figure I've earned it, even if it's not real.

So, I let myself believe Kier really *was* looking at me. That his cool sapphire eyes found me in that crowd and liked what they saw. That his smooth, rich voice was speaking directly into my ear. And that he walked with purpose because he was walking to me.

God, I sound like a princess looking for Prince Charming.

I must be lonelier than I thought. That should come as no surprise considering my living situation.

There are two couples in my house, and while Damien doesn't live with Bennet, he's there often enough. Or he was before Bennet tore his ACL and they started staying at Damien's since his apartment has an elevator. I'm expecting them to be around more once Bennet's able to do stairs again, and I wouldn't be shocked if Damien moves in permanently

once his lease is up, meaning I'm more than likely going to be living with three couples my senior year.

Talk about having my single status thrown in my face every day.

Maybe I should move. Get a place where I won't be subjected to the sounds of sex every night. Damien's got a single apartment, I bet I could take over that lease.

Yeah, right.

Single apartments are well outside my budget. I'd be better off investing in a new pair of noise canceling headphones.

I wonder if Keir made an audio version of his book. That's a voice I could fall asleep to every night. Deep. Resonant. Soothing. One I've apparently committed to memory since I can hear it even now, more than an hour after leaving the venue.

Memories of that lecture bring a smile to my lips, and I'm so lost in them it takes me a second to realize the voice I'm hearing isn't in my head. It's coming from right next to me.

Turning slowly toward the source, I find myself face to face with the man I'd just been fantasizing about. The unattainable one. Kier Caldwell.

He's even more gorgeous up close than he is on stage, and I feel my Adam's apple drop as I swallow back the urge to go all fanboy and gush about how much I love his book and his mind and...him. In a strictly professional way. Mostly.

His sky-blue eyes watch me with an intensity that's both friendly and assessing, as if he's taking in every detail but not in an appraising way. More like he's committing something to memory.

"Pardon?" I say the first thing that comes to mind, since I've got no clue what he said or how he's expecting me to respond.

He cocks his head slightly, giving me a curious smile, and making me wonder if that was the wrong response. Then he points to a spot on the bar and says, "I asked if you could pass me a napkin."

Glancing to my right I see one of those bar-top plastic dispensers that hold napkins and condiments, and with more composure than I feel I reach for it and pass it to him.

“Thanks.” His warm voice cascades over me, sending my heartbeat into an erratic rhythm.

“Sure.” I’m looking at Kier Caldwell. *Talking* to Kier Caldwell. And I have so many things I want to ask him, like whether long-term exposure to nanomaterials is safe, and whether they would further enhance or interfere with the haptic feedback or sense of “touch” that AI-powered limbs are already delivering.

Picking his brain, sharing my excitement about my studies with someone who wouldn’t need sci-fi references to understand what I’m saying... That’s a dream come true. The opportunity of a lifetime. I only need to pick which question to ask first.

But before I can put one into words, I think about how lonely I’ve been. How burying myself in schoolwork to avoid Bennet means the only conversations I’ve had recently are about science. How I made a decision not ten minutes earlier to take risks and put myself first. And how I wished Kier really had been looking at me during his lecture, and not as a colleague.

What’s the worst that can happen? After all, we are in a gay bar.

Taking a deep breath, I sit up straight and paste a modest yet engaging smile on my face. “May I buy you a drink?”

Chapter Two

Kier

Angelic.

That's the only way to describe the face of the man sitting next to me in the bar. High cheekbones, smooth fair skin under a crop of dirty blond hair, eyes the same amber as the whiskey in front of him.

He barely looks old enough to drink, let alone a spirit like that, but when he says *pardon* after I ask him to pass a napkin that puzzle piece falls into place. He's an old soul contained in the body of a young man, with an innocent face and wise eyes.

He seems oddly familiar, though I'd swear I've never laid eyes on him before, and the only conclusion I can draw from that is that my own ancient soul recognizes his.

Ironic, considering I'm often accused of being on the cutting edge in my work life, but I've never thought of myself as modern. I suspect this man has never regarded himself that way either. After all, what twenty-something chooses a dark pub over a flashy club for a drink.

One that drinks whiskey and looks like he'd rather curl up with a good book than go dancing.

Not that he couldn't fit in at a club. Button down shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, a subtle diamond pattern

woven into the fabric that you can only see at certain angles. Dark wash jeans that are slim enough to hug his lean legs without appearing too tight. Trendy white sneakers.

It's not a flashy outfit, but it wouldn't be out of place at a lively bar. It's not out of place here either, much like my own similar ensemble, minus my staple sport coat to go over the shirt.

Timeless.

Yes, I feel an instant closeness to the man who in many ways reminds me of myself despite the fact we've barely said ten words to each other. But while he's an old soul he's obviously barely legal, and I'm not that guy.

I thank him for the napkins and start to mop up the drink I knocked over when I first caught sight of him and misjudged the distance to the bar trying to set my glass down.

Flustered. *Me.*

In my defense, he really is quite beautiful, and lost in thought with a pensive smile on his face that hinted at intelligence as well as beauty... Well, as I said, I'm not that guy. I won't—

“May I buy you a drink?” His voice is more assured than I expected it to be given the soft nature of his features, and aside from the slight pink in his cheeks that betrays his nerves, he holds himself with an air of confidence that's surprisingly sexy. Paired with those full lips and... *damn.*

He's a vision.

I really shouldn't, but my own glass is nearly empty now, and I can't deny I'm curious. Some innocent conversation would be nice, and... The man licks his plump lips, and all my objections evaporate. “I'd like that.”

He motions to the bartender, and I order another IPA.

“Aiden.” He holds his hand out.

“Kier,” I reply, noting—and loving—the firm grip he uses to shake my hand.

“That’s a very Irish name, but you don’t look or sound Irish.” Aiden regards me thoughtfully, like he’s trying to puzzle me together the same way I did him earlier.

“I’m not. My adoptive parents are though.”

“So, if I asked you to choose between the Rovers and the Bohemians, you’d know what I’m referring to?”

“Of course I would.” I gnaw on the inside of my cheek, intrigued.

“And?”

“Neither. Those are Dublin teams, and my parents are from Northern Ireland.” My eyes track over his inquisitive face, fascinated.

“Hmm.” A small grin plays on Aiden’s lips, which are so impossibly pink and lush it takes a fair amount of restraint not to stare at them.

“Hmm?” I lift my brow as the bartender sets a beer in front of me. “Which of those was the wrong answer?”

“Neither.” Aiden swirls his glass with a coy smile. “But my brother-in-law would be disappointed in me if I’d bought a drink for a *bloody Bohemian*.”

“Ah.” Another puzzle piece clicks into place. “Is it safe to assume this brother-in-law is responsible for your taste in Irish Whiskey?”

“It is.”

I’m tempted to ask when that occurred, since he can’t be much older than twenty-one, but since this can’t go beyond a little harmless flirting, I decide his age doesn’t matter.

“So, if I asked you to recommend a good one, you’d say…”

“Knappogue Castle.” His eyes find mine over the rim of his glass as he takes a sip.

“Is that what you’re drinking?”

“God no.” He sets the tumbler on the bar. “This is Jameson. I don’t have Knappogue unless my brother-in-law is buying.”

I find myself trying to bite back a smile. “So, you’re a frugal connoisseur?”

“That’s one way to put it.” His cheeks flush slightly.

“What’s another way?”

“Cheap.” He shrugs bashfully, like that’s some kind of flaw, though I find his honesty endearing.

“A cheap man wouldn’t have offered to buy me a drink.”

Another modest shrug. “Looked like you needed another one.”

“Perceptive.”

“I try to be.” Aiden’s voice drifts off as his brow furrows slightly, giving me the distinct impression there’s something distressing behind that angelic exterior. But the self-assured, sweet boy is back so fast I wonder if I imagined that brief moment of sadness. “So, how does a guy with Irish parents end up a beer drinker?”

I hold up my pint glass and study it curiously, wondering where that question came from. “Lots of Irish people drink beer.”

“I’m sorry, a *not Guinness* beer drinker?” he clarifies.

“What sort of crap did your brother-in-law teach you about the Irish?” I arch a playful brow.

A cute little wrinkle separates his. “That they only drink whiskey and Guinness, apparently.”

“And you believed him?” I don’t know why, but I get the sense Aiden is too smart a man to accept such a simplified, stereotypical classification.

“I was twelve, so yeah. And I never really had a reason to question it until now.”

That pink flush is back, and it’s doing things to me I’m not proud of, so I try to steer the conversation back to something that isn’t likely to bring out his bashful side.

“You’ve had a brother-in-law since you were twelve?”

“My sister’s thirteen years older than me.”

“How many siblings are between you two?” I sip my beer, expecting him to rattle off a list of names or use his fingers to keep track of them all. Needless to say, I’m shocked when he says “None.”

“None?” I repeat. “That’s...”

“I was quite the surprise.” Aiden rubs the back of his neck sheepishly.

Is there any topic that doesn’t make this man blush?

Taking another sip, I prop my foot on the rung of the barstool to ease the pressure in my pants. “I was too. For my birth parents anyway.”

“You know who they are?”

“I do, and let’s just say I dodged a bullet.”

“Same. Being so much younger than my sister I mean. Don’t get me wrong, I love her, but she’s very dramatic, and I like calm.”

Such an old soul.

“That explains why you like this place.” I glance at the room around us, which resembles the pubs my parents took me to in Ireland.

“I’ve actually never been here before,” Aiden says thoughtfully. “I just saw the flag in the window when I was passing by and figured I’d check it out.”

“Same.” *Same? Since when do I talk like a college student?*

Aiden must find that as out of character as I do given the curious smile he gives me, but oddly, I don’t feel foolish for using the term. I feel strangely comfortable.

“So, if you aren’t from Ireland—” Aiden gives me a coy smile “—where are you from?”

“Ohio.”

“Oh.” His brow furrows in a way that I just *know* means he’s trying to think of a follow-up and coming up blank.

“It’s driving you crazy, isn’t it?” I bite back a laugh. “You want to ask about that and have no idea where to start.”

“I really don’t.” He laughs right along with me. “What’s life like in Ohio?”

“Basic.” There I go again, talking like I’m his age, but since it makes him smile, I figure what the hell. “Cold in the winter, humid in the summer. Fall is incredible though.”

“Football?” Aiden assumes.

“That too, but I was thinking about the leaves. Then winter comes and you watch a lot of movies.”

“I can relate. Cold weather and I aren’t the best of friends. Outside the ski slopes anyway.”

“How does that work? You don’t like the cold but you’re a skier?” This man is full of contradictions.

“Snowboarder. And while you’re snowboarding you don’t notice the cold. Sitting on the chairlift is miserable, of course, and every time I get on it, I ask myself why I willingly put my body through the torture it takes to get to the top. But as soon as you start gliding down the hill you forget all about the misery you just endured because it’s so freeing.”

“You paint a very different picture than what I imagined.”

“What did you imagine?”

“A tangle of arms and legs going in a million different directions.”

Aiden tosses his head back with a deep, full laugh. “That does happen in the beginning. But once you get the hang of it it’s unbelievably fun. Sort of like floating on land.”

“You almost make it sound pleasant enough to try.”

“What would convince you it’s worth it? Other than the joy of floating?”

“Assurances that I wouldn’t freeze, for one,” I mutter as I sip my beer.

“That’s the one thing I can’t give you, although I *can* promise you’ll warm up once you’re off the chair lift. And if you’re really worried about it, they make all sorts of gadgets to ease the cold like hand and foot warmers, electric jackets—”

“There’s such a thing as electric jackets?” I gape at him, wondering why this is the first I’m hearing of it.

“Well, they’re actually battery-powered, but they do have heating elements in them.”

“Huh. Maybe I’ll have to put it on the list of things to try.”

“Is that a long list?” His long black lashes seem to brush the very tops of his cheeks as he blinks.

“Sadly, no. I’m not what you’d consider an adventurous person.”

“Depends on your definition of adventurous.” His eyes stay locked on mine as he sips his drink, and I nearly forget to respond since I’m so busy cataloging how they shine even in the dim light of the room.

“Active. Athletic. That sort of thing,” I say when I recover.

“Pardon me for saying so, but you don’t look like you aren’t athletic.”

Glancing down my own slim frame, it’s my turn to go a little red. “I’m not sure running counts as adventurous.”

“Again, depends on your definition.”

“What’s yours?” I fling my gaze to my drink when he starts chewing on his lip.

“Getting outside your comfort zone,” he concludes with a modest grin.

“You do that often?”

“No, but I did offer to buy you a drink, so I’m working on it.” He holds his glass up, penetrating gaze locked on mine, and our glasses clink together before I realize I’ve decided to move my arm.

Dear God, it's like he's put me in a trance.

Eyes locked on each other, we sip our drinks as is customary. Then we set them on the bar, watching. Waiting. For what, I'm not sure, but neither of us seem inclined to look away, as if we'll miss something vital if we do. Something that can't be put into words but can be spoken all the same. A feeling maybe, or a question.

It's not until the clatter of an empty bottle hitting the trash can breaks our concentration that we're startled back to the present.

"So, you're also a football fan?" Aiden's the first to recover.

"Guilty." That one word is all I seem capable of saying after our...*moment*.

"Me, too. I tried not to be since it's so over-hyped, but it's hard to ignore something you're surrounded by, so eventually I caved."

"Have you got a favorite team?" I finally find my voice.

"Oh, no." He shakes his head as if in warning, though his toffee eyes have a playful twinkle in them. "Nothing can derail a perfectly good conversation as fast as finding out you're talking to a rival fan."

"True, but you know I'm from Ohio and we're still talking, so you must figure I'm not a rival fan."

"Being from Ohio doesn't automatically make you a fan of the teams there. Plenty of people choose their team for something besides geography. Besides, Ohio has a few teams, so even if one of them were a rival to mine there's a fifty/fifty chance you wouldn't support it."

"That's a fair point, but you have to admit geography is usually a pretty good indicator."

"Not for me."

"What's your deciding factor then?"

Aiden traps his lips between his teeth like he's trying to decide how much he can say without giving away his reasoning. "Proximity to a superfan," he answers.

“And that means...”

“I’ve been subjected to my best friend’s favorite team for so long it became mine.” Aiden’s voice is kind of resigned, and I’m tempted to get to the bottom of that when he once again changes the subject.

“What are some of your favorite movies?” Aiden props an elbow on the bar and rests his head on his hand, all but forgetting his drink and focusing on me.

At the risk of sounding like a jerk, that’s nothing new. As an expert in my field, I’ve often got the rapt attention of people I’m speaking to, but Aiden’s interest is personal rather than professional, giving it an intimate air. It’s been a while since people were curious about *me* as opposed to what I know, and I like it.

Unfortunately, I doubt we’ll find common ground here, since I have to be at least a decade older than him.

“I’m not sure you’d recognize my favorites since they’re probably from a different era than yours.”

“Thirteen-year age difference, remember.” He smiles knowingly. “Try me.”

“Okay. I never saw an M. Night Shyamalan film that didn’t leave me speechless at the end. Or a comedy by the Coen brothers that didn’t leave me with a stomach ache from laughing.”

“Did they direct American Pie?”

“I don’t think so. The Big Lebowski is probably my favorite of theirs.”

“The dude abides.” Aiden’s grin is so wide it’s infectious. “What else?”

“The Shawshank Redemption. I mean, M. Night Shyamalan is the king of the twisted ending, but I was floored when Shawshank ended.”

“For me that was Fight Club.”

“You’ve seen Fight Club?” I bite back a grin for the umpteenth time since we started talking.

“Um, a totally ripped Brad Pitt? Yes, please.”

“You’re all about the sexy, shirtless men, huh?”

“I mean, they don’t hurt.” He turns a little pink again. “But Fight Club really shocked me when the truth was revealed. I never saw it coming.”

“Yeah, that ending was unexpected.”

“So, you like psychological thrillers and comedies?” Aiden sums up my choices.

“I guess I gravitate towards them, yeah. But I like a good action movie here and there.”

“Have you seen the Matrix?” he asks.

“Who hasn’t? That movie was life changing.”

Aiden sits up taller, intrigued. “How so?”

I don’t want to get into work talk, and how all that code filtering over the screen was the impetus for the career I’ve built trying to merge computers with human functionality. So, I simplify the answer. “The special effects of course, where time seemed to stand still. Movies took on a whole new quality after that.”

Aiden’s toffee eyes regard me so intensely I wonder if he can tell that’s only a partial answer. But if he senses I’ve left anything out, he doesn’t press the issue.

“True.” He nibbles on a plump lip, contemplating, and I have to pinch my leg to force my eyes off them.

“What are some of your favorites?” I ask. “Any era.”

He gets that wistful look on his face again, something I equate to an intelligent mind that’s constantly firing, and once again I have a visceral reaction in places that shouldn’t be awake right now.

“I was hooked on Marvel movies as a kid, and once I was old enough my dad started showing me what he considered the

classics. Caddyshack, Airplane, Monty Python and the Holy Grail—that's my favorite. Shrek.”

“Your dad thinks Shrek is a classic?”

“It was the first animated movie that had adult humor, or so he said. To this day he can't watch the part about the gingerbread man without laughing so hard he actually cries.”

“I haven't thought about Shrek in years, but I suddenly have a desire to watch it right now.”

“It's surprisingly entertaining.” He blinks a few times and ducks his head as though he can't fathom he just said that.

“So, animated movies? You're a fan?” I ask him.

Aiden goes to sip his drink only to realize it's empty, the perfect opportunity for me to say thank you and leave like the responsible man I'm supposed to be. The one who doesn't chase after men with siblings my age. Yet I can't bring myself to stand up. Not when every nerve in my body is humming simply from being in his presence.

So, rather than do the sensible thing, I do something reckless. “Can I buy you a drink this time?”

Chapter Three

Aiden

Kier Caldwell is staring at my lips. And he's been doing it all night.

At first, I thought I was imagining things. That maybe I had something on my face he found distracting, so I licked my lips to remove it. But that simple act only seemed to make him look *more*. So, I kept playing with them. And he kept staring.

Just like he is right now, as I lick away the stray flavor of whiskey from the drink he just bought me.

"So," Kier prompts. "Animated movies are a guilty pleasure of yours?"

Guilty pleasure. Why did he have to phrase it that way? Now I feel like a jerk for pretending not to know who he is and for wanting to do more than just flirt with him.

"I wouldn't say that," I answer, "but I won't refuse to watch something just because it's animated."

"What classics have I missed because I assumed they were kids cartoons?" Kier's blue eyes sparkle like he's teasing me. Indulging me. It's a playful side of him I didn't expect but want more of.

"Spiderman Into the Spider Verse. And the sequel, Across the Spider Verse."

Kier freezes with his drink halfway to his mouth. “You didn’t even have to pause to think about it.”

“Nothing to think about. The animated moves are better than the live action Spiderman movies, in my opinion.”

“Tell me.”

“Well—” I rub the back of my neck while I gather my thoughts “—the characters have more depth. They feel like real people. For example, the Spiderman character doesn’t just get bitten by a spider and become a superhero, he learns that he already possesses the qualities a hero needs, and now he’s capable of building on those qualities at a hero level. And the graphics aren’t overdone. They help tell the story, but they don’t overpower it, so you come away thinking about the story itself and not the images used to tell it.”

Kier’s mouth is parted in a way that usually means I’m speaking above someone’s head, and I mentally berate myself for nerding out on him. Until he blinks and says, “I don’t think I’ll ever look at an animated movie the same way again.”

“Is that good, or—”

“Good. Definitely good.” His smile is part intrigued and part...awed. Like I’ve taught him something he wasn’t expecting to learn, and while that might be my imagination talking, I can’t deny loving the fact *I* may have opened his eyes.

Speaking of eyes, his indigo ones are locked on mine again, and for the second—or third or fourth—time this evening, I feel like they’re seeing more than just my face. Even weirder, I don’t feel exposed under his intense scrutiny. I feel sort of validated, like there’s something worth seeing.

Why Kier Caldwell would find me that interesting I have no idea, especially considering we’ve yet to talk about the one thing I know we have in common. The one thing he’d have reason to regard me appreciatively for, assuming he found my thoughts worthy.

It gives my battered heart a little spark of hope that I’m not destined to be the guy who’s always the friend, never the

boyfriend. Not that Kier would ever see me as more than a friend—he's too smart and accomplished and out of my league—but that *someone* could.

Just then Kier frowns, and my happy moment is ripped away. "What's wrong?" I ask, heartbeat thundering in my ears as I wait for his reply.

"They just announced last call."

Groaning internally, I briefly wish we were at a club instead of a neighborhood bar, which would give us several more hours together. Of course, that would mean we'd never have met, since I doubt either of us are the club type.

"I don't want the night to end." My face heats as the words I didn't intend to say aloud reach my ears.

Kier Adam's apple drops down his throat with such slowness it feels like we're in the Matrix we talked about earlier, where time is relative. Then he brings his hooded gaze to mine and whispers throatily, "Me either."

Is it possible? Could he see me as more than a friend for just this one night?

Summoning every ounce of adventure I possess, I whisper back. "Take me to your place?"

I barely have time to take in the dark-hued room that looks twice the size of my own before Kier has my back pressed against the wall, caged between his arms, body flush with mine.

"Tell me to stop," he pleads even as he grinds his hips against me.

"No."

He leans forward as if to steal a kiss, stopping mere inches from my lips. "I'm too old for you."

"You don't know how old I am."

"Twenty-one?" His warm breath skims over my mouth.

“Twenty-two.” I lick my lips, knowing that will speak to his lust.

Kier’s eyes fall shut as he rocks forward, grazing his swollen shaft along mine with a curt shake of his head. “A decade younger than me. Too young.”

“Not by my math. Besides, I’m old enough to know what this is.”

His mouth seems to seek mine again, like a magnet being called to its match, only to pull away at the last second. “What is it?”

“Tonight. Nothing more.” This time when his mouth nears mine, I close the distance, moaning wantonly when our lips finally make contact.

I’m kissing Kier Caldwell.

Kier Caldwell is kissing me.

Am I dreaming?

My mind is abuzz with thoughts that don’t make sense. That don’t seem real. But the faint taste of beer in my mouth isn’t coming from my lips. Nor is the air filling my lungs. It’s all him.

Though Kier’s lips are soft, his kiss is not, pent up need and desire spearing into me with each swipe of his tongue. I kiss him back just as desperately, refusing to break or offer relief or even to breathe. The only thing that matters is that we don’t stop.

Pressed together, the only purchase I can find is on his back. I clutch at his shoulders, the base of his spine, his ass, pulling it to me so our cocks rub together under the denim of our jeans.

“Aiden.” My name is a plea on Kier’s lips as his fingers tunnel through my hair, holding me in place so he can plunder my mouth. Tingles ripple from my scalp to my toes, the simple sound of my name spoken with such *want* a potent aphrodisiac.

A relieved groan vibrates up my throat as he claims me, turning me to putty in his hands. Hands that claim as well as cradle in their haste to touch every inch of me.

“Tell me to stop,” he mumbles between kisses. “Tell me before I can’t.”

“Never,” I whisper back.

Kier groans, a feral yet tortured sound that goes straight to my dick. In a burst of strength, I grab his ass and haul him up, guiding his legs around my waist. Without breaking our kiss, I walk us to the bed as gracefully as I can given we’re matched in size, following him down as we crash to the mattress.

“Damn that was hot.” He pulls away enough that I can see his heated gaze. “I thought you said you weren’t athletic.”

“You said that. I said I’m not particularly adventurous, but I’m working on it.” I lean down to lap at his lip, earning another soft moan.

“Is this you being adventurous?” he asks as I lick over his neck, tasting a hint of wood and something darkly sweet, like cloves.

Very bespoke.

“This is me being horny.” I nip at the place where his neck meets his shoulder, feeling him shiver slightly beneath me. “Adventurous would be me taking a turn on the bottom.”

“Have you ever—”

“No. But I would.” I save him from having to wonder. “The opportunity just hasn’t presented itself.” I let my weight settle on his and give him a long, lingering kiss. “What about you?”

“Same. In reverse, but same.”

I grind my hips down, pressing our cocks together as I nibble at his lips. “What do you want tonight? Tried and true or an adventure?”

“If we only have one night...both?”

My heart goes still inside my chest. *Did he just say...?*

“Unless you’d prefer to have that first with someone—”

“No.” I cut him off. “I want it with you.”

Kier sucks in a shallow breath, his bottomless blue eyes locked on mine in a way that suggests something far more profound than a one-night stand. It makes my own breathing erratic as my mind fills with all sorts of crazy ideas about *more*.

Shifting to his side, I prop myself on one arm and undo the buttons of his shirt with the other, giving him lazy kisses the whole time. The need for urgency is still there, but I’m desperately trying to tamp it down, so I don’t come across as some sort of overly eager cock slut. Plus, knowing we’ll only have this one night, I want to savor it.

Shirt undone, I push it open so I can see Kier’s chest. There’s a smattering of dark hair around his puckered nipples, and another thin stripe that disappears beneath his jeans, but he’s otherwise smooth, showcasing muscles that are toned without being bulky.

Palm on his abdomen, I leisurely glide my fingers over the silky skin while I pull a peaked nipple into my mouth, giving it a gentle suck.

He arches into my mouth, fingers spearing into my hair.

“Jesus.” He pants, and I bite back a smile as I swirl my tongue around the bud and give it another suck. “I feel that in my dick.”

“You say that like you’re surprised.” I switch to the other nipple and give it the same treatment, this time worrying it gently with my teeth and licking up any lingering burn.

“I am.” His hips push upward, seeking friction to soothe the ache I’m causing. “No one’s ever done this to me before.”

Truthfully, I’ve never done this to anyone either, and I’m not sure I’d have thought to if I hadn’t heard Bennet begging for Damien to pinch his one night when they got going faster than I could get my earbuds in. I suppose if one good thing had to come from their fuckery, it’s that I seem to have picked up a move Kier enjoys.

Sliding my hand from his stomach to his pants, I undo them just enough to open the fly and pull out his dick. It's thicker than I expected given his lean frame, though it's not so big as to be disproportionate, and as I stroke along its length, I figure it's got to be pushing eight inches, roughly the same as mine.

I wonder what it'll feel like inside me.

I'm sort of anxious for that, but not so much that I want to rush things, and not just because of my own desire to savor this, but to ensure Kier does as well.

Using a lax grip, I gently tug on his shaft while biting and sucking his nipples. But when I flick my tongue back and forth over them, Kier lifts his chest off the bed, pushing them into my mouth with a strained groan.

"You really didn't know these are a sweet spot for you?" I don't have to ask the question since he's already given me the answer, but I want to hear him say it. To acknowledge that *I* found it.

"I had no idea. God why does this feel so good on my cock?" He pushes said cock into my fist, though I don't grip it with the pressure he wants, and his hips fall back to the mattress.

"No idea. I just know we've all got our sensitive spots. Any others you want to tell me about, or should I find them on my own?" I pull a rigid bud into my mouth and lick over it while teasing his dick.

"I... Fuck, I don't know. My hips maybe?"

Kissing a path down his chest, I give his hip bones the same treatment I did his nipples. It doesn't seem to be quite as potent, but he wriggles beneath me nonetheless, spearing his cock into my slack fist.

"God, I haven't been this turned on in years, and you're barely even touching me." Kier's chest heaves as he tries to temper his body's reaction to my ministrations, though he can't quite keep his hips still when my hand is loosely wrapped around his dick. "What are your sensitive spots?"

"I'll tell you when it's your turn."

“When’s that?”

“When you fuck me.” My blunt answer has his eyes fluttering shut, and I just know he’s imagining what that’ll feel like, same as I am.

Truth be told though, as much as I’m eager to have him inside me, I’m even more eager about the prospect of being his first *bottom*.

I don’t have nearly the same hang up he does about the age thing, which at a decade really isn’t a big deal in my mind, but the notion that he’s ten years older than me *and* a virgin top... Who would’ve thought a guy ten years my senior would have any firsts left to give, let alone consider giving them to a guy he just met at a bar.

Put that way, I suppose I can understand why he keeps asking me to stop him. He’s probably assuming some sort of responsibility for all this because of his age, much like I’m assuming responsibility for making sure he enjoys his first time topping. It’s futile on both our parts, but something I feel compelled to take into consideration.

Kier’s dick twitches in my fist, telling me whatever he’s imagining has him excited. My own pulses painfully behind my zipper in response, but I ignore it as I climb between his legs and work his pants lower, so his beautiful cock is free to stand proudly between his legs.

I circle it with my fist and give it a long, firm tug, loving the way my touch has Kier uttering a strangled moan. Then I lean forward and suck the crown into my mouth.

Kier’s hips buck violently, the shock of my mouth a total surprise since his head was arched back in ecstasy.

“Holy shit,” he cries, bringing his eyes to meet mine. “That was... You... Oh my god.”

“That one really shouldn’t come as a surprise.” I fight off a grin as I swirl my tongue around the head. “Everyone’s dick is a sweet spot.”

“Yeah, it’s not. I just... It’s been a while, and I wasn’t ready for it.”

“It’s been a while since anyone sucked your dick?” I pull it between my lips and gently suckle on the tip.

“Oh, agh.” Kier fights to keep his pelvis grounded. “It’s been a while since...anything.”

“Same.” I borrow the term he’s been using all night as I take him to the back of my throat and pull back with exaggerated care, dragging the flat of my tongue up the underside of his cock.

“Seriously?” He gasps as I lick along his shaft. “I don’t buy that. Your mouth isn’t giving me the impression you’re out of practice, which incidentally, is going to leave you disappointed if you don’t ease up. I wasn’t being polite when I said it’s been a while.”

Feeling empowered, and somewhat awed, I graze the tip of my finger over his balls. “How is that possible? You’re too sexy not to have any offers.”

“I could say the same about you.” He pants, and I freeze with my mouth hovering over his junk.

“Me?” I lick my lips nervously.

“You’re surprised I think you’re sexy?” Despite the lust in his eyes, Kier seems genuinely confused.

“Yeah.” I feel my face heating exponentially, making it pointless to hide the truth. “I am.”

“Aiden, I’ve been fighting a boner since my first glimpse of you, and that was *before* you opened your mouth, and I learned your brain is just as enticing as your body. And the fact that *you*, at ten years my junior, aren’t afraid to take charge right now... I don’t even remember the last time I’ve been this turned on.”

That’s possibly—definitely—the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me, and it hits so hard I swear I feel tears building in the back of my eyes. But I *will not* be the guy who gets emotional during a one-night-stand, no matter how impactful those words are. So, I force a sly grin to my lips as I give his cock another stroke.

“Let’s see what I can do with this boner then.” Dipping my head, I take him to the back of my throat again, sucking firmly as I pull back to the tip. Kier fists the sheets as his stomach clenches in an effort to hold still, a sight that has me groaning around his cock and causing it to twitch in my mouth.

“Oh my God!” he groans as I do it again. “Oh my God. Your mouth is too perfect. You’ve gotta stop. You’ve gotta stop or I’ll come.”

Pinching the base of his dick between my thumb and forefinger, a trick I learned from the only action I’ve seen recently—porn—I grip hard and suck him down again. And again, caressing him with my tongue as I squeeze him with my throat.

“Aiden. *Leanbh*. Jesus.”

When the endearment registers, I still, not because I know what it means—I don’t—but because he says it in a way that strikes me as intimate. Worshiping almost. And while that’s probably my mind playing tricks on me, there’s a part of me that wonders if it’s not. If he *meant* to give me a pet name.

On the off chance he did... I need some space before we continue or else I risk *wanting* that to be true.

I already admire this man on an intellectual level, if I allow myself to think for even a second that it could be more... That he could feel anything beyond lust for me...

My heart is too fragile to go down that path.

“Condoms? Lube?” I ask, letting go of him entirely.

“Suitcase,” he mumbles breathlessly. “Front pocket.”

Still dressed, I get up and cross the room to his bag, fishing out the items I need and saying a little thank you that he travels prepared even though nights like this are an anomaly for him. When I get back to the bed, I notice his breathing has leveled some, though his cock is an angry purple, which I secretly love.

Standing at the foot of the mattress I pull his shoes off and drag his pants off his legs, pausing to admire his naked form.

Long, muscular legs. Trim waist. Sinewy arms. And that gorgeous cock, framed by a thatch of dark hair.

“You’re staring,” Kier accuses.

“You’re incredible.”

He lowers his eyes almost demurely before lifting them to meet mine. “Don’t I get to see you?”

Now it’s my turn to blush. “If you want.”

Kier bobs his head decisively, so I toss the condoms and lube on the bed and reach for my shirt, undoing the buttons from top to bottom, one at a time. It’s a practical way to undress, but Kier’s so engrossed, so utterly enthralled with each flick of my wrist, you’d think I was performing a striptease.

Discarding the undone shirt on the floor, I kick off my shoes as I reach for my pants. The man *licks his lips* as I pull them down, cock springing free with such force it actually smacks my stomach, leaving behind a tiny bead of precum.

I knew I was turned on, but this is next level.

“Come here.” Kier’s voice has a gravelly quality to it that’s like a siren song, and without hesitation I crawl up the mattress to straddle him.

Our hard cocks brush together as my weight settles on his, both of us biting back shameless groans. Then his hand shoots forward, wraps around the back of my neck, and pulls me to him for a scorching kiss, tongues wrestling for control as we frot against one another.

My toes curl as he licks into my mouth, stealing my breath as though it belongs to him. As though he needs it more than his own.

“Aiden,” he mumbles against my lips. “Fuck me.”

Chapter Four

Kier

Sinful.

Temptation personified.

Beautiful.

How else can I describe the man who asked me to take him home? Whom I obliged by bringing to my bed? Whose made my body vibrate in ways previously unknown to me, all of which he did before our lips even met. And when they did, all sense of reason was lost to me.

The only thing I knew was want. Need. Desire.

Now I'm spread out before him, begging for his cock, and I've never been more excited to do something so debauched.

How can this man think he's not sexy?

Though to be fair, it's not his face or his body that I find most appealing. It's his mind. The way he listens so intently, asks thoughtful questions, and walks a line between playful and real... I love an active mind, and when you put it behind the face of an angel with a body built for sin, you've got sex incarnate.

I'm not an impulsive man, but I couldn't say no to that. Hell, I just asked him for it.

Aiden shivers at my request, lusty eyes raking over me from under heavy lids. Then he swipes his tongue along mine before moving away to grab the lube, and scoots between my legs as he coats his fingers. Yet it's not the way he rubs them together to warm the liquid that has my cock standing at attention, it's the reverent way he looks at me.

Yeah, he just told me my body is incredible, but I have the sense that superficial observation doesn't encompass the admiration in his gaze. It's part of it, but just as I find his mind intriguing, I get the sense he feels the same way about me.

He hasn't said or done anything to confirm that, it's just an inkling I have based on our earlier conversations, but it feels right. Almost like that thought I had when we first met, the one about recognizing another old soul, is something that crossed his mind as well.

I'm not saying we're two halves of a whole—that would be ridiculous given the age difference and the fact that we've both already acknowledged this thing is only for tonight—although it's probably fair to say there's a connection here that goes beyond sexual chemistry. One that is enhancing every look. Every taste. Every touch.

Taking my cock loosely in his fist, Aiden strokes me with one hand while probing my hole with the other. His skillful fingers apply just the right amount of pressure, building my desire, while the hand on my dick distracts me from any discomfort. It's something an experienced lover would think to do, although in Aiden's case, I think it's more a desire to make me comfortable than first-hand experience dictating his actions.

I may be projecting, putting more weight than I should on that comment about it being a while for him too, but I find myself foolishly wishing that there haven't been many before me.

What is he doing to me?

The pressure on my hole increases slightly as Aiden seeks entrance, and with a heavy exhale I do my best to relax.

Though I can't do it fully—anticipation has me out of sorts—I let go enough that he can push in to the first knuckle.

“Oh, God,” I groan as that finger probes in shallow strokes.

“Too much?” Aiden stills immediately.

“No. God no. That feels incredible.”

The worry creasing his brow fades as he pushes deeper, pulling another salacious groan from my lips.

I'm so tight, so sensitive, that a single finger nearly stretches me to the brink. But it doesn't feel foreign. In fact, with each gentle thrust my body seems to reclaim more and more of its sexual appetite, pulling the digit in. The further he delves inside me, the harder it is to keep my hips still. To stop from chasing the release I want to delay as long as possible.

“Damn, Kier,” he whispers, never taking his gaze away from what he's doing. “You're squeezing me so hard. I'm not sure I'll last inside you.”

“That makes two of us.”

“That's not your normal role, so it's understandable. I usually top, and I'm a little worried I won't last past the first push.”

“I'm not talking about when the roles are reversed, Aiden.” His warm coffee eyes meet mine when I say his name. “I'm talking about this, right now.” I suck in a ragged breath as his finger pulls back to tease my entrance, then pushes back in. “You've got me wound so tight I'm afraid I'll have to count just to make it the first minute.”

A knowing smile spreads across his face. “Along Came Polly,” he recites the name of the movie I'd been referencing. “That's more my era than yours.”

“We don't seem bound by eras when it comes to movies.” It's a simple observation, yet I suspect he finds it just as meaningful as I do given our current circumstances.

“True,” he muses as his fingers resume their discovery.

We fit in so many ways... I'd fall for this man if there weren't so many years between us.

Shoving that thought from my mind, I give myself over to Aiden's touch, drifting to a pleasantly aroused state as he explores. Thoroughly.

Under his ministrations, a tantalizing hum makes itself at home from the waist down. Wave after wave of bliss roiling through me with each stroke on my cock, each press of his finger.

As he works his way deeper into my body, Aiden occasionally moves his hand from my shaft to my sac, massaging my balls with a tender touch. The combination of pushing and pulling and squeezing has me so entranced I feel weightless. Overrun by a floating sensation that pulls a contented sigh from my chest.

Is this what Aiden meant when he talked about snowboarding? Probably not, but this feels so euphoric if snowboarding is even a fraction as incredible as this, he could probably convince me to try it.

I'm vaguely aware of the fact my rock-hard cock is pointing to the sky while the rest of me is virtually boneless, and I'm shocked to realize I've got no shame about that. I sort of love it, being at Aiden's mercy while he takes me to nirvana with a single finger.

Is it him, or just the fact I've been celibate for so long?

That's a question I could get lost in, if Aiden didn't pick this moment to crook his finger in a *come-hither* motion, causing me to practically launch off the bed.

"Holy shit," I gasp as my heartbeat thunders in my ears.

Aiden pulls his finger back and releases my dick, withholding all pleasure, and to my horror I whimper. *Whimper.*

"Don't worry, I'm not finished." He shoots me a flirty smile as he gives his own cock a few leisurely strokes. "I'm just giving you time to get your bearings."

“Is that your way of saying I’m old?”

Aiden glides his hand soothingly over my thigh. “That’s my way of saying you’re so responsive I’m going to have to take my time.”

Biting back a derisive snort I say, “I love that you’re so polite, but you just had your finger up my ass so it’s really not necessary.”

Crawling over me, Aiden leans down to peck my lips. “Remember what I said about sensitive spots? How we all have them?”

I hum my agreement since I can’t speak with his mouth brushing over mine.

“Right now, I’m finding all yours. When you have the chance to explore mine, you’ll find out I can be just as responsive.” He nips at my bottom lip. “So, no more talk about age, okay?”

Despite wanting to marvel at the wisdom he already possesses, I tamp that thought down and nod my head. “Okay.”

Aiden gives me another long, lingering kiss, before scooting back between my legs. He adds more lube to his fingers as those amber eyes meet mine with unabashed lust. “I’m adding another finger this time.”

My head bobs in agreement, and I do my best to relax as two fingers breach my channel. The burn is more acute this time, but it fades almost as quickly as it comes on, I’m assuming because my body has already started to remember how much it likes this.

Once again, my eyes fall shut as he pushes deeper, kneading the delicate tissue that leads to my hypersensitive bundle of nerves. He subtly probes that spot, igniting a series of pleasurable ripples that aren’t strong enough on their own to tip me over the edge, but have my cock twitching with need.

I don’t have a musical bone in my body, yet right now, I feel like an instrument being lovingly tuned by a master. Sure,

strong fingers plucking me with fragile ease, until they find that elusive note, and play it to perfection.

Jesus, he's turned me into a poet. And as a science guy, I fucking hate poetry.

My spine bows up as Aiden brushes his fingers over my prostate, a surge of euphoria causing my limbs to seize so hard they start to cramp. I shift restlessly, whether to increase the pressure or relieve myself of it I'm not sure, but the effect is a tidal wave of harmony so intoxicating my muscles give and my back crashes to the mattress.

A moan that can only be described as sultry passes between my lips, though it seems to echo throughout the room long after I'm out of breath to make the sound. Opening my eyes, I see Aiden kneeling over me, gaze focused on where we're joined. Lips parted to release the hum of his arousal, his smooth, angelic face pink and flushed with desire. *For me.*

That realization is so potent I'm unable to stop my hips from rocking onto his hand in a rhythm that matches the pace of his thrusts. Though it's a subtle movement, it's enough to have him withhold his touch.

"Noooo," I complain when I'm empty.

"We're still not done," he grits as he fists his shaft and gives it a few pulls. That—and pupils blown so wide I can't see the caramel of his irises—the only clues that his control is just as precarious as mine.

My hips continue to search for relief, rigid dick spearing the air in vain. Aiden watches me with a hunger that betrays his calm façade as he grabs the lube and says, "Three?"

"I'm ready." I shake my head.

He regards me warily. "You said it'd been a while, and I'm not exactly built for...beginners."

"I'm not a beginner," I huff, though as my eyes find the cock standing proudly between his legs and I get my first substantial look at it, I understand his hesitation.

Aiden's not massive, but his package isn't as lean as he is, so the two fingers he's been using aren't representative of what's to come. That said, I meant that remark about not being a beginner. It might be snug at first, but I actually welcome that sensation. It's one of the reasons I've never felt the need to top. I enjoy being filled. I enjoy the glide of a hard dick along my walls, and clenching around the intrusion. And I especially enjoy when the crown of that dick rubs my prostate.

Truth be told, I'm not even sure why I said I wanted to try topping with Aiden when I've never had that desire before, but something about him makes me greedy. I want to experience everything he's willing to give, and I'm not feeling very patient about it.

"Kier, I want you so bad I'm ready to combust, but I don't want to hurt you either." A wavy line creases Aiden's forehead, and though it's camouflaged slightly by the wisps of hair falling over his face, it's impossible not to see.

"I know." I reach for his hand and link his fingers with mine, giving them a reassuring squeeze. "And I promise, if it's too much I'll tell you. But I'm ready to combust too, and I want you inside me. Please."

The desire in my eyes must trump the concern in his, since he drops my hand only to reach for the condom.

I watch him roll it over his length, marveling at how sexy he looks performing such a simple task. Biceps flexed, stomach coiled, deft fingers moving with quick and efficient grace. Not for the first time, his confidence and poise strike me as advanced for his age, and I find myself caught in a complicated spiral of desire versus integrity.

Taking him to bed is both selfish and irresponsible. Deep down I know that. But from the first moment I saw him I felt an inexplicable pull, and at this point, my desire for him is less a want than a need I don't have the strength to deny.

My overactive mind could analyze my choices indefinitely, and it probably would if not for the gentle pressure of Aiden's crown nudging my entrance, bringing me back to the present.

Our eyes meet over the length of my body, and he inches slightly forward. I force the air from my lungs in a steady stream, hoping to ease his entry and avoid any sudden gasps that could make him assume he's too much.

Fully seated, he leans forward, resting his forehead against mine. It's a tender gesture, though I suspect it's just as much about regaining a sense of control as it is savoring the moment.

“Are you counting?” I breathe against his lips.

“I would be if I could remember any numbers.”

Chapter Five

Aiden

My cock is buried inside Kier Caldwell.

I know I sound like a broken record with all these *ah ha* realizations, but tonight is so far outside the scope of what I thought was possible it's practically *impossible* not to remind myself it's really happening.

How did I even get here?

One minute I'm sitting solo at the bar, re-visiting some of life's more consequential choices, the next I'm rolling around naked with a man I've admired professionally for years. A man who would meet every gay boy's idea of Prince Charming, only sexier.

And if I want him to remember this night as fondly as I will, I can't come already.

"Are you counting?" He breathes against my lips.

"I would be if I could remember any numbers."

Kier chuckles beneath me, which has him squeezing my dick like a vise.

"Oh, God." I groan, pinching my eyes shut as I try to steady my breathing. "No laughing or I won't last."

“We’ve both already made it longer than I thought we would.”

“Don’t say that.” Our noses brush as I try to shake my head, which I can’t really do with our foreheads pressed together. “I’m not giving in yet.”

“I’d take it as a compliment.”

“But I want to impress you.” *Could I sound any whinier, Jeez?*

“You’ve denied me three times already. Trust me, I’m impressed.”

“Just...” I exhale slowly. Inhale. Let it out again, holding absolutely still so I don’t increase the friction on my already oversensitive cock. “That’s better.” I sound as winded as I feel, but at least I didn’t come prematurely.

Lifting off him so I can see his face, I swivel my pelvis experimentally, gauging how deep I can go. Which angle gets me closest to his prostate. Kier’s eyes flutter shut when I bottom out, but when I roll my hips in a way that pushes my cock upward, he grates out a sultry, “Fuuuck.”

The tremor that wracks through him nearly makes my arms buckle, but now that I can anticipate his response I’m not surprised when I graze that sensitive bundle of nerves and it happens again.

“Sh-shit. That feels... Oh my God,” Kier rambles as I steadily push into him, taking the edge off my aching dick and pleasuring him in equal measure. But when I feel him start to tense, I pull back, leaving only the tip of my cock buried in his hole.

“More,” he mumbles.

“Not yet.” I couldn’t hold my hips still if I tried, but the tiny little pulses are just enough friction to keep us both primed without the risk of coming undone.

Kier writhes beneath me, seeking more of my length, so I lick at his lips, hoping to distract him long enough to stop chasing me. But the man’s mouth is heaven, soft and pillowy

and pliable, and I get so lost in them I find myself buried to the hilt before I remember to breathe.

“Fuck.” I recover my senses long enough to remember it’s too soon to let my body have control. It’s a herculean effort—my cock has never felt so ready to combust—and it borders on painful not to chase the spikes of pleasure that accompany each thrust. But my desire to imprint this night on Kier’s soul is greater than my desire to come, so I hold back, giving him only a fraction of my length while I try to temper my need.

“I wasn’t expecting you to be such a tease.” Kier’s fingers ghost along my obliques, sending a wave of shivers coursing through me.

“I’m not teasing.” I steal a quick kiss since his lips are just too tempting. “I’m making this last since I’ll only get to do it once.”

If I had any blood left in my brain, I might think twice about the flash of disappointment that appears to drift across his face. But knowing it wouldn’t make any sense for him to feel that way, I dismiss it and concentrate on keeping a steady, if shallow, rhythm.

Kier, who apparently still objects, sinks his fingers into the fleshy part of my ass and tries to pull me deeper. He manages to get me nearly halfway in before I halt his progress with a smirk. “I wasn’t expecting you to be so needy.”

“I wouldn’t be if you weren’t such a tease.” He tries to pull me in again, but I evade his reach, pulling out completely and kneeling between his legs.

“I’m not teasing.” Kier’s eyelids flutter shut as I cover his sac with my palm and fondle his balls, a reaction that makes me feel prouder than it should. And has me making confessions I should keep to myself. “I want you to remember this night forever.”

His sapphire eyes snap to mine. “You really think I could forget any of this?”

I shrug a listless shoulder, the weight of his gaze suddenly too heavy for me to meet.

Great, now I'm acting like an insecure child, giving him a reason to have that complex about our age difference.

Kier sits up, inadvertently pulling out of my reach, and palms the side of my face, forcing me to meet his stare. “In case I wasn’t clear before, I don’t make a habit of taking people home with me. I’m not even sure why I did it tonight except that like you, I didn’t want it to end. You fascinate me. And if nothing else happens between us, this will still be one of the most memorable nights of my life.”

His words are hard to accept given I’m just the random guy in the bar while he’s *Kier Caldwell*, but the intensity in his eyes, his warm palm cradling my cheek, make me want to believe. It also makes me feel guilty as hell that I’m fully aware who he is and haven’t said anything.

Yet I can’t confess now.

It might make me a selfish asshole, but for this one night, a man whose work I deeply admire says he finds me fascinating, and I want to justify that. To be what he imagines I am, and to fully experience what it’s like to be wanted.

Closing the distance between us, I take his mouth in a kiss that—I hope—says everything I can’t.

You fascinate me too.

Thank you for making me feel seen.

For making me feel important.

For giving me a piece of you.

“Aiden,” he mumbles against my lips.

“Yes?”

“Make me come.”

Reaching for his cock, I’m shocked to find my moment of insecurity didn’t spoil the mood. In fact, he’s just as hard as he was while I was inside him, giving me a renewed desire to make this a night he won’t forget.

Kier falls back to the mattress as I gently stroke his shaft, spreading his legs in blatant invitation. I line up and push

forward, vision swimming as I sink inside his tight hole. It's a snug fit, one that engulfs my length inch by glorious inch as I press onward, our combined moans echoing in the room around us as we come fully together.

Bottoming out, I hold still save for the hand gliding over his cock. Kier shifts and flexes around me, adjusting, and a ripple of ecstasy spears along my length and up my spine. When he finally settles, I start to move.

Slowly at first, still on my knees so I can admire the view, I pump gently. The sight of my cock disappearing into his tight channel is a heady aphrodisiac, visual confirmation of the pressure I feel, which only seems to enhance the pleasure.

Kier's head rolls from side to side as I drive into him with long, leisurely thrusts, hips occasionally straining upward to chase the hand on his cock.

I've never seen anything so sensual in my life.

"You're beautiful like this," I murmur as I watch his body writhe, feel it seeking pleasure from mine.

A hint of pink floods his cheeks. "I don't think anyone's ever called me beautiful before."

"I've never called anyone that." I gyrate to hit him from a new angle, reveling in the way it makes him bite his lip to contain a moan. "But there's no other way to describe how you look right now."

"I would've thought I looked debauched." Kier's back bows as I pump his cock.

"That too." I grin mischievously, giving his shaft another tug while plunging to the hilt.

"Jesus, that feels incredible." He presses a hand to the headboard, seeking leverage to push himself against me.

"Which part? This?" I spear forward, nudging his prostate with my crown. "Or this?" I stroke his dick.

"Both." His head thrashes back and forth as he repeats, "Both."

“Good to know,” I mutter to myself as I brace to drive him wild, knowing it will test my own resolve.

Jaw locked, I piston my hips in rhythm with my fist so that each time I bottom out my hand hits the base of his dick. The force of my thrusts is enough to push him up the mattress, but the hand he’s got positioned on the headboard helps counter my efforts, making us slam together with reckless abandon.

“Holy...holy shit.” Kier’s chest heaves as he takes everything I have to give. “Aiden, God.”

His ramblings spur me onward, but already my thighs feel ready to give, and I have to let go of his cock and lean forward, caging him between my arms to give my hips control.

The new position allows me to push even deeper, and a subtle roll of my pelvis has me pegging his prostate. Each time my crown meets that sensitive bundle of nerves he clenches around me like he’s trying to hold me in place, the added pressure sending a jolt of rapture to my dangerously heavy balls.

“Oh God, Aiden. Leanbh. I’m gonna come.”

Once again that deliriously uttered endearment nearly makes me falter, but this time around I’m quicker to dismiss it, to bring my focus back to what I’m doing to Kier’s body that would make him lose his mind.

Drawing from reserves I didn’t know I had, I propel forward with renewed urgency, relentlessly pounding Kier’s prostate. Each thrust has me crushing his cock between us, giving it the friction it needs to topple into oblivion.

“Yes. Yes. God, Aiden. Yes.”

Hearing Kier beg for me is like a shot of adrenaline straight to my cock, which is ready to explode. To stave it off I start counting like the damn movie, praying I can delay long enough to send him over the edge first.

I’m at twenty-eight when Kier goes rigid beneath me, gripping me so hard I can’t contain the cry that rumbles up my throat.

For a brief second all I know is searing heat. The kind that makes time seem to stop, like the lag between a roller coaster reaching the top of the climb and starting to drop. Then I'm in freefall, pleasure racing through me as my balls explode with a force that renders me immobile.

Buried to the hilt, I'm not sure if the tremors I feel are coming from me or Kier. Either way, my cock is quivering inside him as I spill, filling the condom to the point I'm not sure it can contain my release.

Limbs shaking, I fall to Kier's chest, the evidence of his orgasm spreading between us. Two strong arms envelop me, cradling me against the chest below. A pair of soft lips presses against the hair on the top of my head.

"Can you feel my heart trying to beat out of my chest?" I grimace, but it's too late to take back the question.

"Can you feel mine?"

Going still, I'm able to hear the rhythmic thumping. "Yes."

"I feel like I've run a marathon."

"Do you do that? I know you said you're a runner." Pulling out, I shift to the side, so Kier isn't bearing my full weight, but leave my head pressed against the crook of his shoulder. It's not easy to get rid of the condom that way, but I'm afraid it won't feel natural to lay next to him if I get up, so I don't.

"The most I've ever done is a half, a long time ago."

I toss the knotted rubber to the floor and give his nipple a playful pinch. "No more age talk."

"That wasn't about age, just time." He rubs the spot I tweaked. "I haven't run that far in years."

"I don't think I've ever run that far."

"You look like a runner." He drags a soothing fingertip over my arm.

"I get that a lot, but really I'm just twenty-two."

"Now who's talking about age?"

“That wasn’t about age, just genetics. Or metabolism. I’m still burning more calories than I can consume, same as most every twenty-two-year-old man.”

“Okay, I’ll allow it.” His fingers continue their path over my arm, a sensitive touch I could get lost in.

The whole evening is something I could get lost in, and I’m doing my damndest not to. My heart is in a raw state right now, more susceptible to any displays of affection than it otherwise would be, so as much as I want to indulge in the fantasy that this is more than a fun night, I can’t.

“The whole *no age* thing is my rule.” I kiss the side of his pec since it’s so close to my lips.

“And I’m trying to honor it. But in my defense, it’s not that easy to ignore.”

“How so?”

“Well, for starters, your semi-hard cock is resting on my thigh, meanwhile my soft one is going to need at least another thirty minutes before round two.”

“We’re still doing that?” I prop myself on an elbow to look at him, stunned.

“Do you not want to?” A flicker of doubt flashes across his eyes.

“I do. I just didn’t want to assume.”

“While we’re on the subject—” Kier tenderly brushes a lock of hair off my forehead “—I don’t want to make any assumptions, but I am curious why you’re willing to let me be your first?”

Oh, God. If I have to admit he wasn’t a stranger to me he’ll remember this night for all the wrong reasons. True, it’s the fact I’m familiar with his work that inspired me to approach him, but everything since then has been about how he makes me feel, not who he is.

“Does it matter?” I ask.

He studies me thoughtfully. “I suppose not. Maybe I’m just looking for a way to explain why this is happening.”

Fuck! The man’s words could stitch my heart. It’d break all over again in the morning, but still... It’s a thoughtful question that deserves an answer. I guess I can give him a partial truth.

“I feel comfortable with you. More comfortable than I would’ve expected in such a short time. Almost like we’re old friends or something. Don’t laugh.” I bury my nose in the mattress. “I swear I’m not crazy and I’m not going to become infatuated with you or anything, I just feel like you’ll treat me with respect.”

“Aiden.” Kier’s fingertips under my chin bring my eyes to meet his. “I feel the same way.”

His soft lips meet mine, and this time I get so lost, I’m not sure I’ll find my way back to reality.

Chapter Six

Kier

This man. How can he make me want to hold him protectively *and* be held down so he can devour me.

Side by side, our lips graze together slowly as my mind races with a tangle of thoughts, all of them pointing to one definitive conclusion.

There's something special about the young man beside me.

I know I'm not supposed to dwell on his age, so I'll keep this thought to myself, but I'm in awe of his confidence, particularly in bed. The things he just did to me... The way he made my body sing...

I've had lovers twice his age that weren't nearly as attentive or attuned to me as he was, and that makes him the sexiest man I've ever been with. Yet there's no ego to accompany his self-assurance. If anything, I think he's more vulnerable than he lets on.

That came through, briefly, when he seemed worried I might forget this night. *Him*. It was there and gone rather quickly, but it left me with the distinct impression something happened to him to make him doubt himself, and for whatever reason that makes him think he's not worth remembering.

But he is, and now it's my turn to show him that.

The sweet, tender press of his lips on mine has my sated cock filling far sooner than expected, and while I'm eager to experience this next first for both of us, I'm also sort of content to stay just like this, sharing gentle kisses.

I can't even remember the last time I was in this position. High school? College? Back when I was innocent enough to find pleasure in kissing alone, and before I realized fucking could have meaning.

That sounds backward, even to my own jaded mind, but unfortunately, it's true. I got to college, where it was far easier to find men like me, and had sex as often as I had meals.

That's not as big an exaggeration as I wish it was.

My dick was in heaven. I was too, for a time. But after a while those encounters left me feeling empty, and I realized I'd prefer to have infrequent but meaningful sex as opposed to regular, emotionless sex. Not that I've had a lot of emotion-fueled sex, I just think I might prefer it.

That would seem to put me in a demisexual category, but I think it's simpler than that. My work is the most fulfilling thing in my life, and if something or someone can't excite me the same way, I'd prefer work.

Over the years there have been a few people that piqued my interest on a physical and intellectual level, and we'd end up in bed. But until tonight, no one's ticked the emotional box the way Aiden has. Made me feel like my words are cherished, or that I'm breathing life into their body with a simple kiss.

Aiden's lips part beneath mine, and I accept the invitation, tasting hints of whiskey, and cedar, and...me on his tongue.

An inexplicably possessive growl rumbles up my throat. "It's been a long time since I've tasted myself on another man." I kiss along his jaw, down his neck, before going back to his lips, murmuring, "I like it."

"I can tell." He notches forward, rubbing our firm cocks together and sending a bolt of heat straight to my balls. "But I thought you said you're too old to be ready again so quickly."

“You’re breaking your rule, talking about age.” I push him to his back, trailing my lips down to a nipple so I can have a turn to see what makes him beg.

“Only because it’s important for you to know it’s not that big a deal. Not to me.”

“Hmm.” I hum as I give the pink flesh a little love bite, which has him arching his chest into my mouth with a shout.

“Holy shit! Do that again.”

I oblige, licking the abused nub as Aiden gasps for breath, wide eyes registering surprise.

“You seem just as shocked as I was that this is a sensitive spot.” I flick the tip of my tongue over the pointed bud, watching his eyes fall shut in surrender.

“I am. A...friend gave me the idea, but I haven’t tried it until now. Or had anyone try it with me.”

“You have a friend that gives you tips about sex?”

Aiden’s eyes snap open, and if I thought he blushed easily before, it’s got nothing on how fast he turns red now. “More like the walls are thin and I sometimes can’t get the earbuds in fast enough to avoid picking up a few things.”

God, he’s priceless.

“Learn anything else from your neighbors we should try?” His breath hitches as I suck his nipple into my mouth.

“No. Nothing.”

The forced calm in his voice could be from what I’m doing with my tongue, although I get the distinct feeling it’s not. I’m about to ask a follow-up question when his fingers tunnel into my hair, massaging my scalp as he holds my mouth to his chest.

“That really does feel amazing. All the way in my balls, just like you said.”

Since he brought them up, I slide my hand down his torso, letting my fingertips ghost over his trim waist, his strong quad,

his inner thigh. When they reach his sac, I cradle it in my palm.

“Oh, now that’s—” His breath hitches as I knead him languidly “—that’s really incredible. It feels... Holy shit.”

Smiling to myself, I resume my exploration of his nipples while toying with his balls, plumping and tugging and rolling them around my fingers as his soft, erotic moans fill the room.

“These seem like another sensitive area.” I tease my lips along his neck as my hand works his sac. “Are there others I should know about?”

“I’m pretty sure anywhere you touch me will have the same effect.”

“Should we test that?” I nuzzle the base of his ear, and his whole body trembles.

“You’re having way too much fun with your turn.” Aiden’s voice is strained, like he’s fighting to keep his composure though I’ve barely touched him.

So responsive.

“Yes, I am.” Giving his balls some relief, I reach for his cock instead.

Aiden’s hips buck off the mattress with an audible inhale, settling when I treat him to long, leisurely strokes.

Glancing down his gorgeous body, I note how his legs seem to fall to the side, giving me greater access. I’m not sure he’s conscious of it, but either way, it’s a sign he likes my touch, and that has me determined to pleasure him as much as he did me.

“So hard,” I whisper as I fondle him. “So full. See how well you fit in my hand?”

“Mmm,” Aiden hums dreamily, making me realize I said that aloud. I’m briefly embarrassed by the admission but relax when it appears he agrees. Besides, it’s true. His cock in my hand, in my ass, body next to mine... Any way you look at it, we do seem to fit well together.

“I like this.” Aiden’s soft voice halts my wayward thoughts.

“This?”

“Laying here while you touch me.” It’s not just his face that flushes pink, but his whole chest.

It takes a moment for his words to register, and when they do, they offend me on his behalf. “You’re always the giver?”

He nods almost imperceptibly.

“Not tonight.”

Knowing he’s never been adored the way he should be, I take my time exploring every inch of his sweet body. Releasing his dick—for now—I rub my hand over his flat chest, intermittently circling or pinching a nipple, but mostly just caressing his smooth skin. Waking the nerves beneath the surface.

Aiden seems to drift into a contented state, the hint of a smile playing on his lips, a soft hum punctuating the occasional sigh.

My hand drifts lower, mapping the taut muscles of his abs, swirling around his belly button. He sucks in a breath when I near his hip bones, a ticklish spot, but since this is supposed to be a sensual exercise, I don’t dawdle there. I just let my hand lazily roam over his creamy skin, indulging myself as much as him.

Though there’s nothing inherently sexual about my touch, Aiden’s cock is a steel rod pointing to the sky between his legs, and while there’s so much of him to admire, my gaze keeps drifting back to it.

Slightly paler than the rest of him, its girth is impressive, its length slightly above average. I’m tempted to take it in my grip, to feel the stiffness of it in my hand as I stroke it. Yet I don’t want to rush, so I trail my fingertips along his thighs, watching it twitch as if to say, *me next*.

I’ll get there soon enough.

Fingers roving languorously, I take advantage of his relaxed state to pepper kisses over his silky skin. Over his pecs, down

his torso, at the base of his cock. There's no rhyme or reason to my exploration, although there is an ulterior motive. To discover every sensitive spot I can. And when Aiden seems to tense, I know I've found one, so I pay it special attention, adding my tongue to the kiss.

If I thought he looked angelic before, he's downright ethereal now; long black lashes brushing the top of his cheeks, full lips parted slightly, subtle—almost imperceptible—undulations as my mouth dances over his skin.

Beautiful.

His cock is slightly flushed now, the urge to hold it too great to ignore. So, I take it in hand, pumping it with exaggerated care as his fingers flex against the sheets.

“Kier,” he whispers breathlessly.

“Yes?”

“More.”

“Flip over,” I murmur next to his ear.

His plump lip turns down in a pout that nearly has me relenting, but there's so much more of him to explore.

“It'll feel good. I promise.” I kiss the corner of his mouth, give his shaft a firm stroke, and help him roll to his stomach.

Aiden's back is just as beautiful as his front. Lean. Smooth. Sinewy. Sitting on the back of his thighs, I run my hands over his shoulders, along his spine, admiring how his shoulders taper to his waist.

The back is one area I'd never really considered erogenous, but the subtle way Aiden squirms under my touch has me thinking twice. I'm pretty sure he's rubbing his dick into the bed, which I find insanely hot.

I'd intended to begin my exploration much lower, but I'm curious what sort of anticipation I can build before getting to that point. So, I let my fingers draw random lines over his velvety skin, dropping kisses everywhere my touch makes him whimper.

When Aiden's hips move with more purpose, I move my focus lower, cupping his lush cheeks. He moans carnally as I work those globes, pulling them slightly apart, and for reasons I can't explain that gives me the urge to explore them with my mouth.

I've never kissed anyone here before, and once my lips meet his skin, I wonder why that is. Not only is it silky soft, it pulls the most erotic groan from deep in his chest. One that causes his whole body to vibrate. So, I do it again. And again. Even daring to lick a stripe up the center of his crack, which makes him cry out in surprise.

"Holy shit," he pants.

"Good?" I press the tip of my forefinger against his little star, not enough to breach it, just to gauge his reaction.

"Hell, yes." He pushes his ass up, increasing the pressure on his virgin hole, and I relax considerably with the confirmation that he really does want this.

Gently circling that spot, I feather kisses at the base of his spine, loving the way it makes him arch closer to me, seeking more. He's so responsive, and even though I have no right to think it, a significant part of me hopes that's less because of how his body is made and more because of *me*.

"I didn't know that could feel so good," Aiden mumbles into the mattress.

"It gets better." I reach for the lube, squirting a healthy drop onto my fingers. "But it might be a little uncomfortable before it does."

"I know. I'm ready."

Pausing to warm the liquid between my fingers, I admire the curves on display before me. His ass is magnificently round. Plush. As a bottom, that's not usually something I notice about my partners, but on Aiden, it's hard to look away.

Parting his cheeks, I press the tip of a single finger against his rim. That little pucker clenches as if trying to ask for more, and my dick gives its own little twitch in response. "Remember to breathe," I say as I press forward.

Ignoring my own advice, I hold the air in my lungs as my finger sinks into Aiden's hole. The resistance is more intense than I expected, squeezing the digit to the point I briefly wonder if it's possible to cut off circulation. But the slickness of the lube renders that a moot point.

"Fuck," Aiden grunts when I stop at the first knuckle.

"Okay Leanbh?" The Irish name for baby rolls off my tongue so easily I suspect it's not the first time I've used it tonight, which oddly enough doesn't set off a panic. I'm sure I'll overthink it later, but right now, if it calms him, I'll say it.

"Yeah." He exhales heavily. "Feels better now."

We've still got a long way to go, though I see no need to point that out. Instead, I do my best to probe while keeping my finger mostly still, pressing forward in miniscule increments.

Aiden's channel is even softer than his skin, warmer too. And tight. So incredibly tight I worry I might not be able to stretch him enough, especially when he groans with what sounds like strain instead of pleasure as I get to the second knuckle.

Holding my finger in place, I lean down to pepper more kisses along his spine and feel him start to relax beneath me. "Beautiful," I murmur, and he relaxes further.

It takes another few minutes of cautious movement, but eventually we get to the point where I can slide my finger freely, and I pump the digit faster, deeper, giving him a glimpse of what it will feel like to have my cock inside him. What he made me feel not thirty minutes earlier.

The way he writhes under my touch suggests he's ready for another finger, but before I add it, I curl the tip in search of his prostate.

I'm unclear on whether Aiden's ever felt his before. Just because he hasn't bottomed doesn't mean he's never had it stimulated, and given how he worked mine, he's well aware of how that spot can ignite fireworks. Yet knowing his previous partners weren't overly generous in return, I suspect there's a

good chance tonight might be his first experience with that particular sensitive spot.

My suspicions are confirmed when he practically launches upward with a shocked, “Holy shit!”

“Shhh.” I pull out and rub his back in gentle circles. “I’m sorry that startled you. Did you not like it?”

“No, it’s... I liked it. A lot. I just wasn’t expecting it.”

“Get comfortable and I’ll do it again.”

It’s a little harder to breach him this time, with his anticipation running so high, but when I do reach those sensitive nerves again, the most illicit groan spills from his lips.

“Oh my God. I... Kier.” He says my name like a plea, and my heart thunders in my chest.

I’m not sure how long it takes to work my way to three fingers, but by the time I do, Aiden’s back is glistening with perspiration, and his hips are writhing steadily beneath me. His need is so great he’s practically delirious, and I’m not in a much better state.

Praying I’m not so stimulated I won’t last, I line my covered cock up to his hole. It still looks too small to take me, but when he begs I press forward.

The pressure is instant and overwhelming.

My vision swims, the room going dark as I pinch my eyes shut to block out everything but the need to *hold on*. Jaw locked tight, air gets trapped in my lungs as I fight to ignore the bliss that bombards me from every angle.

Dear God this is borderline torture.

Not even the tightest grip from the strongest fist feels as unrelenting as Aiden’s channel. My toes curl and cramp as I fight my way back from the ledge, fear of disappointing him outweighing the urge to let go. Still, I have to borrow his counting strategy to keep myself from thrusting to the hilt. It helps...barely.

Beneath me Aiden shudders, whether from relief or discomfort I can tell. Pressing a soothing kiss to his shoulder blade I whisper, “Okay?”

“Mmm.” He nods into the mattress. “Just, start slow.”

I press another, tender, kiss to the back of his neck, and cautiously move my hips.

Sparks erupt along my length when I draw back, and once again I have to hold my breath to fight through the ecstasy that wants to consume me. Though it's not just physical ecstasy trying to engulf me, it's something deeper, more profound than the base urge for a release.

I want to be part of him.

And I want him to be part of me.

In a way, that's already happened. There's enough trust between us that we've abandoned our traditional roles, and for that alone, this night will be memorable for both of us. But I don't want it to be a memory I look back on fondly, I want it to be the start of something.

Yes, that's a ridiculous notion. Or it should be considering we only met a few hours ago. Yet consider what I already know. Aiden's smart, funny, and adventurous. Quietly confident, though not immune to vulnerability. Wise beyond his years and humble enough not to flaunt it. Plus, he's gorgeous, and seemingly oblivious to that fact.

How could I not want more than a night with him?

“More.” Aiden's breathless plea rouses me, reminding me that I'm supposed to be making this incredible for him.

Angling my thrusts downward, I roll my hips so the crown of my cock nudges his prostate with each pass, pulling the most erotic noises from his throat. Noises that have my balls drawing tight, that I selfishly hope to hear beyond tonight.

“Yes, Kier. Yes.”

“Oh, God, Leanbh. Oh God.” My right hand finds his, linking our fingers together above his head. My left snakes under his body, gripping his cock so he has something to thrust

into each time I bottom out inside him. And my lips...those meet his in a kiss so passionate I wouldn't be surprised if it fuses part of my soul to his. Or if he gifts me part of his in return when he cries his release against my mouth.

Once again, the bliss is so overwhelming my vision swims, though this time instead of darkness I'm consumed by a blinding light. The kind I'd associate with heaven since it comes with the sensation of floating, and a feeling of absolute peace and contentment.

My cock is still trembling when my sight returns, the aftershocks of our combined euphoria rippling through the spot where we're joined. One of them, considering our mouths are virtually fused.

With a soft, sweet kiss to those swollen lips, I pull back to give him some relief, knotting the condom and tossing it aside to deal with later.

"How do you feel?" I run a soothing palm over one of his plump cheeks.

"Amazing." He sighs.

"Me, too."

Aiden flops to his back, hair mussed in the most depraved way, which makes him look roguishly sexy. "You might need to call housekeeping for some new sheets."

Now it's my turn to go pink. "What's the proper amount to tip for changing sex sheets? Do we even have to change them? Maybe if we stick to the other side of the bed we can avoid the wet spot."

"We?" Aiden blinks up at me with those gorgeous toffee eyes. "You want me to stay?"

Cupping the side of his face, I bring his lips to mine for a delicate kiss. "The night isn't over."

As we snuggle on the dry half of the bed, my fingers dance over his arm while I recite all the things I'll bring up in the morning. Things like phone numbers, and when we might be able to see each other again since I don't live here.

But when I wake up in the morning, he's gone.

Chapter Seven

Kier

FOUR MONTHS LATER

“Staff meetings are Monday morning at nine. Bring your own coffee because the stuff they serve here isn’t fit for human consumption. The bagels are good though,” my new colleague Daniel says as he finishes the tour of the computer science building right where we started, my new office.

“Good to know.” I muster a timid smile.

His jovial grin falls. “Hey, the students aren’t that bad. I know it can be daunting to lead a class, but you’re no stranger to lecture halls, right? Besides, these kids aren’t here to challenge you like some of the other experts in the field do, they’re here to learn. You’ll do great.”

I thank him for the advice even though lecturing a bunch of undergrads isn’t the thing that keeps me from smiling. At the risk of sounding pompous, teaching people about my life’s passion is something I can do in my sleep, so I’ve got zero trepidation about that. I’ve also got zero excitement about it. I haven’t had much enthusiasm about anything for the past four months, when I woke up alone after the most incredible night of my life.

Just as I have every day since, I recall that night with alarming clarity. The soft touches, the whispered confessions, the potent euphoria. Most of all I remember the moments right before sleep claimed me, when I rehearsed all the crazy things I wanted to say about our connection being too great to ignore. That we should see each other again.

I never got the chance to voice those thoughts.

Though Aiden's absence should have been a clear sign he didn't feel the same way, I struggle to accept that.

I'm not usually one to misread people, or situations, so the notion I was the only one to catch feelings was a blow. One I haven't been able to wrap my head around. And since my head is programmed to observe, analyze and solve, that's what I've been trying to do.

Over and over again, I dissected every minute of our time together. Every shared smile. Every lingering glance. Every passionate kiss. Time and again I came to the same conclusion.

I didn't imagine our connection, I just underestimated how vulnerable he really is.

That's the only explanation.

I know he felt the same magnetic pull for me I did for him. I could feel it in the way his body responded to mine. In his kiss. In the way he trusted me to be his first top. But I foolishly believed in that old adage that actions speak louder than words, even though I'd had to use my words several times that night to reassure him of his appeal.

And rather than telling him how I felt as soon as I realized it, I rehearsed what to say. I can only conclude that sometime during the night he had another moment of self-doubt, one that I couldn't diffuse since I was asleep, and snuck out.

My failure to act in the moment is the reason I woke up alone, I know it. As a result, I haven't smiled very often since then. I haven't taken a full breath either. Both are hard to do when you're afraid you've lost the thing that would've made life complete.

"Anything else you need to get settled in?" Daniel asks.

“I’m supposed to have a TA. And a research assistant. Do you know how I get in touch with them?”

One of the reasons I took this position is the cutting edge computer lab that will allow me to continue my work with nanotechnology and AI. Pairing the two to enhance the functionality and comfort of prosthetics is a passion I’ve been pursuing since my adoptive father lost his leg in a car accident nearly a decade ago, and the research that goes into that endeavor is daunting to say the least. I welcome all the help I can get, and I was assured my new charge, whoever he is, will be up to the task.

That, and the position is in Colorado, so...

It’s probably futile to look for a man whose full name I don’t even know. Hell, I’m only assuming he lives in Colorado since that’s where we met. For all I know he was on vacation that fateful evening and he really lives in Florida.

Still, I’ve been back to that pub on two separate trips, on the off chance I’d run into him again, which of course didn’t happen.

I wish I could explain how that one night affected me so profoundly. All I know is not a day goes by that I don’t think of Aiden. Triggers are everywhere. Football. Movies. Whiskey. Even couples, the affection between them a reminder of the time we shared.

Yes, I’m being irrational. I just can’t shake this feeling that I’m supposed to have more than one night with Aiden, so I keep trying to force another.

Unfortunately, looking for him isn’t even the most pathetic thing I’ve done since that night. That honor belongs to what I’m doing right now, taking a position as a guest professor at Front Range University because it puts me in the same state where I last saw him.

That sounds a little stalkerish, although it’s really not like that. I didn’t search out this job—my dignity is depleted, but it’s not gone—so I didn’t go looking for an excuse to temporarily relocate. I did, however, take the position

specifically because of the location, even though I'll be teaching classes well below my capabilities since I'm merely the substitute.

I think the school was just as shocked I accepted the position as I was, but timing is everything, right? And their timing, plus their location just an hour outside Denver, couldn't be more perfect.

I'd have preferred to be in Denver proper since that's where Aiden and I met, but this is the closest I could find a job with the resources to continue my research. Since I only need to lead a couple classes in exchange for having access to the facility, it seems like a win, win. The university fills a vacancy for a professor on sabbatical, and I get to work from a place that will make my search for Aiden easier.

"You've probably got an email with the name and contact information of your assistants so you can coordinate when to meet them," Daniel answers the question I'd already forgotten I asked.

I really need to do a better job of staying in the moment.

"Do you need help getting online or onto the school portal?" he asks.

"I've probably got those instructions in here somewhere." I hold up the folder given to me by our department head.

"Let me give you my cell, just in case. You can ping me if you have any questions."

I hand over my phone so Daniel can add his contact information, and before he hands it back, I hear the soft ding of a notification. He fishes his phone from his pocket and looks at the screen with a nervous smile. "Now I'll know who you are."

It makes sense that he'd text himself to capture my contact information, but something about his anxious expression leaves me wondering if his intentions are purely professional.

Please let me be misreading things. I have zero patience for anything but work and torturing myself over Aiden.

Forcing a tight smile to my face I thank Daniel again and tell him I'll reach out with any questions, then I sink into my office chair, prop my elbows on the desk, and bury my hands in my hair.

I'm a thirty-two-year-old workaholic pining for a man ten years my junior who I've somehow convinced myself I need in my life despite not even knowing his full name. Who am I, and what have I done with my mind? It's supposed to be genius level for God's sake. I need to get a grip.

It's unlikely I'll find Aiden just because I'm in the same state where we met. In fact, it should be statistically impossible. Given the number of people who live here, and the fact Aiden might not even be one of them, I'm probably spinning my wheels for nothing.

Not probably. Definitely. I'm definitely on a fool's errand and definitely driving myself crazy. I *know* that. So, why can't I stop?

This is so unlike me. So foreign. Not just the fact that I'm chasing something outside of work, but the fact that something is a *someone* who's barely an adult.

Leaning back to rest my head against the top of the chair, I take in the room around me. It's as empty as my chest feels. Nothing adorning the walls. No personalization whatsoever. A hollow shell.

I used to think work was all I needed to feel fulfilled, and for years that was true. The advancements I helped make... The accolades I received... The lives I changed... My lack of a personal life didn't bother me since I could *see* that I was making a difference. Yet after one night with Aiden I suddenly miss what I never realized I wanted.

A life outside work.

Someone to laugh with. To touch. To love.

Could I really love him after just one night? The notion seems far-fetched even for my admittedly obsessed mind. Yet I don't have a better word for it.

That night with Aiden was like putting color on these bare walls. Movie posters and quotes and sports memorabilia... all manner of *life* that I'd deemed inconsequential until he made me remember it. And all those things pale in comparison to the color *he* made me feel.

What am I doing?

Is this what a mid-life crisis feels like? Could I be discombobulated because I'm aging, not lovesick? Pining for someone ten years my junior certainly falls into the crisis category, as does surrounding myself with people his age, like I'm trying to reclaim my youth.

Logically, that would make sense. Hormones can do some freaky shit, and if mine are out of balance, it would explain why I'm acting so irrationally.

Did I uproot my life because my body is out of whack?

That's a terrifying thought. One I should have considered before moving across the country. Although now that I'm here, maybe instead of thinking of this as an opportunity to find what I lost, I should be thinking of this as a fresh start.

Daniel's not bad looking. His brown hair doesn't look as silky as Aiden's blonde locks, and his hazel eyes lack the swirling intensity of Aiden's amber ones, but overall the combination is flattering. His build is appealing, tall and trim like Aiden, and he flushes the same way Ai—

Dammit.

How can I start fresh when I can't even look at another man without comparing him to Aiden?

Focus, Kier.

Booting up my computer, I try to log into the school portal to access my email. Classes start next week, and I should make plans to meet with my assistants before then so we can go over their role.

I'm waiting for the little wheel to stop spinning—does it ever just take you right to the inbox without a wait—when there's a sharp knock on the door.

Please don't let it be Daniel.

I get out of my chair with a heavy sigh and cross the room, grasping for an excuse that will get rid of whoever it is with the utmost speed.

But when I get the door open time stops.

Aiden.

He looks just as I remember him, minus the dark circles under his eyes, but even those don't detract from his angelic beauty. If anything, they just make me more determined that I should be with him, so I can make them go away.

My lungs reach capacity for the first time since I woke up alone, though the air doesn't stay in them for long. It comes out with a breathy "*Leanbh*" as I yank him inside, slam the door, and crush my mouth to his.

Chapter Eight

Aiden

The lips on mine are the first physical contact I've had with another person since I left Kier's room, and they're so rejuvenating they bring tears to my eyes.

I knew I was drowning. Numb. I had been ever since realizing Bennet was in love with Damien, and instead of finding the surface after my night with Kier I kept sinking deeper. Walking away from him... God. He was supposed to be a fantasy. An escape from the shitshow my life had become. I was never supposed to catch feelings.

Nor was he.

And curled next to him in the darkness of his hotel room, his arm protectively draped around me, there was no doubt in my mind we both had.

I could see it in the way his eyes seemed to peer straight into my soul. Feel it in his tender caress. Hear it in his words.

Leanbh

I looked it up. It's the Irish word for baby. The whole time we were making love—true, that's not how it started, but what it became—he was calling me *baby*.

Dream come true, right? No-name college kid snagging the attention of one of his idols, the chance to live happily ever

after?

Too bad the whole night was based on a lie.

Kier thinks we were two strangers. If he knew I was an admirer long before I offered to buy him that drink...

I couldn't bear the thought of seeing the disappointment on his face when he learned the truth. So, I took the coward's way out. I left like a thief in the night. And I've been living in a fog ever since.

I thought I was numb after realizing Bennet was in love with Damien, but in the months since walking away from Kier... I now know I didn't understand the meaning of the word. Still, numb had become my default setting over a month before that fateful night, so nothing was really different after. It was just... *more*. More emptiness, more loneliness, more nothingness.

My roommates, which now includes Damien—I saw that one coming a mile away—think I'm just overworked. Busting my ass to juggle classes and work and preparing for what comes after graduation. They don't know I'm just going through the motions, barely scraping by, because for one night after I thought my heart was broken it was whole, and now it's shattered.

"Aiden. Leanbh." Kier mumbles against my lips, tongue probing until they part enough for him to enter. A haunting cry rumbles up my throat as I taste him again, memories of that night morphing with the present to bring me back to life.

Kier? Oh, God. This is real?

I'm afraid to believe. Afraid to *want*. He still doesn't know the truth, right? But he's kissing me like the months apart have been just as devastating for him as they were for me. Like I'm his most treasured possession.

Maybe he's forgiven me.

Strong fingers tunnel through my hair holding my face to his. "I looked everywhere, Leanbh. *Everywhere*." His swollen lips whisper over mine. "I checked with the front desk at the hotel. The pub. You paid with cash, and you were never there

when I went back. It's like you were a ghost. But I knew you were real. I knew it."

"You looked for me?" I squeak.

"Of course I did."

Kiss.

"I told you I wouldn't forget that night."

Kiss.

"You."

Kiss.

"I didn't want it to end after one night."

Kiss.

"I would've told you that morning, but you were gone. Why'd you sneak out?" Kier's pained expression makes my heart physically ache.

Oh God. I don't want to lie, but how do I tell him the truth?

"I didn't want to," I whisper. "I thought it'd be easier to leave than to have an awkward goodbye. I'm sorry."

Kier presses his forehead to mine and strokes my cheek with his thumb. "It's okay, Leanbh."

Kiss.

"You're here now. You found me."

Kiss.

"How did you find me?" He pulls back just enough for me to make out the subtle line between his brows.

He doesn't know. He hasn't forgiven me. The pieces of my heart that had stitched back together at the sight of him tear anew.

"I didn't find you, Kier. Not intentionally." I sniff, blinking back my gathering tears. "My counselor told me to report to this office."

“Your counselor?” His sapphire eyes turn cloudy. “You’re a student here?”

“Yes.”

“In the computer science program?”

“Yes.”

“Classes don’t start until next week. If you’re here now... Are you... My TA? My research assistant?”

“Yes. Both.”

“If that’s true then—” Kier blinks so fast his eyes become an icy blur. “You’re obviously familiar with my work, so... You knew who I was in Denver?”

I can’t look at him while I admit to my deceit. All I can do is close my eyes and nod.

Kier’s hands fall away from my face like they’ve been burned.

“What was with all the getting-to-know-you questions if you already knew the answers?”

“I didn’t know the answers,” I say softly.

He takes another step back. “My history is on the jacket of the book I went to Denver to talk about.”

“Your professional history.” I toe the ground. “Where you went to school, your degrees, where you work. Nothing about who you are.”

That seems to give him pause, though a quick glance confirms his expression hasn’t softened. If anything, it’s more critical.

“Why didn’t you ask about my work? I assume you were in Denver for my lecture, and at the bar you had unfettered access to pick my brain. Why didn’t you?”

Finding the courage to meet his eyes, I hope if he hears anything I have to say it’s this. “I thought about it, and as much as I would’ve enjoyed learning directly from you, I wanted to learn *about* you even more.”

“I—” Kier pinches his eyes shut and rubs the bridge of his nose. “You lied to me.”

“I omitted the full truth.”

“Why?” His face looks as broken as my heart feels. I think that’s why the truth spills out. All of it.

“I just wanted someone to talk to. Things had been messed up with my roommate, so I was avoiding the house, burying myself in my studies, and at that point, I hadn’t had a conversation that didn’t involve computers or AI in close to six weeks. When you sat next to me, my first thought was to bring up the one thing I knew we had in common. But even after hearing you speak and feeling so inspired, I couldn’t bring myself to talk about work anymore. I wanted to make a connection. I wanted to feel seen. You made me feel that, right from the start, and I was afraid if you knew I’d followed your career you might dismiss me as a crazed fan or something.”

The lines around Kier’s eyes seem to fade a bit, and for a second, I think that means his anger has too. Then they’re back.

“You took that decision away from me.”

My gaze falls to the floor. “I know.”

“Jesus, Aiden.” My head snaps up just in time to see Kier look to the ceiling, almost as if he’s pleading for guidance. “You’re a *student*. I’m a professor.”

“Not my professor.” I sound like a toddler trying to argue semantics. “I’m not in any of your classes. I can’t be if I’m your assistant.”

“Is that any better?” His tortured gaze meets mine. “You work for me now. I’m not... I can’t... I can’t believe I finally found you and... Fuck!”

The outburst is so unexpected I shudder.

“Why you?” Rather than the velvety-smooth cadence I love, his voice has a gravelly quality to it.

“What?”

“Why’d they assign you to me?”

My blush spreads from the base of my neck to the tips of my ears. “I’m top of my class. Studying how to integrate software into hardware to improve the functionality of prosthetics.”

Kier’s eyes are so wide they look more cartoonish than real. And I get it. There’s lots of ways to integrate software and hardware, but to do it in prosthetics... That’s a niche space.

“Small world?” I say lamely.

“How did you pick that field? That’s not something they do at this university.”

“Not yet.” I offer an equally lame smile. “I’ve mostly been working on robots. I found out about prosthetics when I had to do a paper for one of my courses, and I couldn’t think of a better way to make a difference through my education, so I’ve been researching it on my own. After graduation I hoped to find a position with one of the companies specializing in that space.”

Kier’s shoulders seem to droop. “And I’m your best shot at getting into one of those companies.”

I don’t bother trying to offer another opinion because there isn’t one. His name on my resume, or better yet a recommendation from him, would be like a golden ticket. I could go anywhere. We both know it.

And now I know why my counselor was downright giddy when she told me I needed to get over here as fast as possible. She thought she was giving me the key to my future, not grinding the broken pieces of my heart to dust.

Head drooped so low his chin practically hits his chest, Kier fishes his phone from his pocket and hands it to me. “Put your information in here. I need to know how to reach you.”

“I don’t understand. You want my number?”

“You’re my assistant, right?”

“Oh.” There’s no hiding the disappointment in my voice. “Yeah.”

I take the device and punch in my number before handing it back to him. When he still doesn't look at me, I turn to go, stopping short when I hear him speak.

“Aiden.”

“Yes?” My chest fills with hope.

“What's your last name?”

Aaand now it drops. “Oh. Uh, Sinclair.”

“I don't see it in here.” Kier's thumb scrolls over the screen, searching.

“That's because I put it under Leanbh.” I let myself out before I see him react, since I'm not sure I want to know if he finds that amusing, endearing, or heartless.

Please don't let it be that last one.

I probably should have put more thought into his reaction before filing my name under *baby*, but in my defense, desperation can make you do crazy things, and I'm feeling pretty fucking desperate.

After getting my heart broken the first time, realizing that heartbreak was more like heartburn given that Bennet was never supposed to be my person, and having it broken again by the guy who I'm pretty sure is... Yeah, I'm one keystroke away from snapping.

True, this heartbreak is my own doing because I acted stupidly, but what makes it even worse is that Kier seems to return my feelings, unlike the unrequited crush I had on Bennet. The one I thought was love until my night with Kier.

In the months since Bennet fell for Damien, since I met Kier, I've had a lot of time to think. And in that time, I realized my feelings for Bennet could be attributed to the fact that he made me feel seen, much like Kier did. But with Kier, he didn't just see me at the surface level, he admired me. All of me, including my adventurousness *and* my vulnerability. He said as much when he called me sexy and reassured me that he'd never forget that night.

Clearly, I've got a few insecurities if I could believe I was in love with Bennet just because he accepted me for who I am. And if I hadn't met Kier, I might've continued to think that's what love was. Now I know it's more than that. Now I know it's not just accepting but admiring my attributes and my flaws and understanding how they shape me, the way Kier did.

And yeah, maybe it's premature, ill-advised, or even reckless to use that word to refer to Kier, but I won't cheapen what happened by calling it a crush or even a one-night-stand. It may have been just the one night, yet it was so much more.

And now, because of my actions, it might never be what it could have been. What it should have been.

Miraculously, I cross campus without seeing anyone I know, and am able to slip into my house and up to my room unseen, holding back the tears until I'm safely locked behind my bedroom door.

Kier Caldwell wanted me. Looked for me. And now he probably hates me.

I think I've hit a new level of lonely.

Chapter Nine

Kier

SEPTEMBER

My finger hovers over the edit button, ready to change the name from Leanbh to Aiden, just like it's done every day since he came back into my life.

God he's got balls. Massive ones, if this little stunt is any indication, and part of me wants to strangle him for thinking he's in a position to act like the bold little lover I took to bed all those months ago. The other part of me wants to applaud him for it, then ravish him.

I've been fighting that battle every day for the better part of a month.

I don't know why I can't bring myself to edit his information except that regardless of where we stand now, I still think of him as Leanbh. Maybe even more now than I did before.

Working with him has only made him more fascinating to me.

For one thing, he's brilliant. I can trust him to grade assignments without any oversight from me because he's got such a solid grasp on the material. For another, he's reliable. Always on time, always organized, always anticipating what I

need and having it ready for me. And having him by my side when we're reviewing data means I've got a front row seat to witness the excitement he has for the work.

That's the confident side of him I've admired from the start. And as for the vulnerable side, it's still there, in the longing glances he gives me when he thinks I'm not looking. The anxious way he waits for my approval.

I get as far as hitting the edit button before I cancel out of the screen without making any changes.

Not for the first time, my mind recalls the conversation we had the first time he stepped into my office, where he confessed to foregoing the opportunity to pick my brain for the chance to get to know me on a personal level because he was lonely.

The conversation may have started under false pretenses, but the irony is he's most likely right about what I would've done had I known he followed my work. I probably would've declined the invitation to talk. I definitely would've declined the request to take him home.

But then I'd never have known him.

That's the real mindfuck right there. Aiden is my TA. My research assistant. I'm pretty sure if anyone knew what happened between us all hell would break loose, and I'm pissed at him for putting me in this position.

Yet I don't regret that night.

I relive it every time my head hits the pillow, tossing and turning for hours on end until my brain can't process any more and I fall into a restless sleep.

A familiar knock has me tossing the phone to my desk, bracing for the intrusion that seems to come every day. "Come in."

"Hey," Daniel says cheerfully. "Some of us are going to grab a drink after work, you in?"

I still haven't figured out if Daniel is this friendly to everyone or just me. I am the new guy, so he might be

innocently trying to make me feel welcome when he pops in to ask how my classes are going or whether I need help with anything. He just seems to do it more than the other professors here, which gives me pause.

This isn't the first time he's extended an invitation to socialize, or to grab lunch or catch a movie, or any number of things that might help me get to know him a little better. This is the first time Daniel has mentioned others though, and I could use a night off from pining over a man I can't have.

"Yeah, text me the details. I'll meet you there."

Based on the way his jaw drops, he wasn't expecting me to accept. But he quickly recovers, pulls out his phone, and a second later I've got the name of a bar about five miles off campus.

I spend the next few hours creating a lesson plan and emailing Aiden instructions for what I need him to do for class, then shut down my computer, lock my office, and head for the bar.

It's more of a lounge than a bar, with low couches and coffee tables set up in several intimate circles. I find my colleagues in a back corner—thankfully there's an open spot that's not right next to Daniel—and take a seat next to a woman who works in the department's main office. I think she's part counselor, part department director, or something like that. I'm embarrassed to admit I don't really know, I just know she doesn't teach any classes.

I'm stereotyping, but I'm hoping she'll keep the conversation to something other than work since she's not a professor.

"Hi, Grace. Nice to see you."

"Kier." She smiles. "It's nice to see you off campus."

Maybe those other invites from Daniel included everyone and I just didn't realize it.

"Yeah, sorry. I needed to get settled at home before I could justify coming out for drinks."

“I get it. There’s nothing worse than coming home and feeling like you can’t relax because things are out of place.”

“Exactly.” I return her smile and order a beer from the waiter before speaking again. “So, are after-work drinks a regular thing?”

“Once a month or so.” She sips her Cosmopolitan. “Except during finals. Then it might be daily.”

“Don’t we have it easy during finals? All we have to do is grade tests.”

“Professors have to prepare study guides, hold study sessions to help the students prepare, monitor the test itself... And as for me, I get flooded with questions about how a bad grade might impact GPAs and job prospects, even before anything has been graded.”

“Huh, I didn’t realize it was such a busy time.”

“That’s why there might be daily drinks.” She holds her glass up as if to toast me, only I don’t have a drink yet, which she notes with a tiny laugh. “So, how are you settling in? Is Colorado a big change from the east coast?”

Since Grace helped recruit me, she knows I’d been working with a bionics company in Boston prior to coming here.

“Not as far as work goes, that’s pretty similar. But the lifestyle is different. People are more outdoorsy here than what I’m used to. Some of the things I hear the students talking about...hiking, biking, climbing. That’s all new.”

“Just wait until it snows. Then they’ll be talking about skiing, snowboarding, ice climbing. It never stops.”

Mention of snowboarding has my mind drifting to Aiden, and how he described it like floating. As if she can read my mind Grace brings up the man himself.

“How is Aiden working out as your assistant? Don’t you just love him?”

“I uh, yeah. He’s great.”

“When Jennifer said she was going to take a sabbatical I just knew I had to get you for her replacement. Aiden’s been a fan for years. I hoped having you here might cheer him up a bit.”

“Cheer him up?” I repeat as I take my beer from the waiter. “What for?”

I regret asking for details as soon as the question leaves my lips, but I can’t shake this protective instinct I have when it comes to Aiden, like I want to shield him from anything that might make him doubt himself.

“I’m not sure, to be honest. He just seemed to fold in on himself out of nowhere last spring. One day he was his normal, happy self. The next, he was like a shell of the Aiden I know. And whenever I asked if he was okay, he’d say yes, even though he clearly wasn’t, but since he wouldn’t talk to me, I wasn’t sure what I could do.”

“When was this?”

“April maybe?” Grace shrugs and takes another sip of her drink.

April. That’s nearly a month before we met, so the shift wasn’t because of me. Didn’t he say something about trouble with a roommate?

“What about over the summer?” I ask. “Did you see him?”

“Oh, yes. It was even worse. He seemed to lose weight, and I’m pretty sure he wasn’t sleeping well since he always looked tired. I overstepped a bit and asked if he was sick—he assured me he wasn’t—just stretched thin trying to fit everything in between classes and work.”

“What sort of work?” I take a drink as I realize my mouth is too dry.

“The same thing he’s doing now, only for Jennifer. Between you and me I do think she relied too heavily on him, but he never complained. Aiden’s such a hard worker.”

I feel my Adam’s apple drop as I swallow. “And now? Do you think he seems better now?”

Grace tilts her head to the side. “Yes and no. He still looks too tired, and he’s still a little more distant than he used to be, but there’s a hint of the old spark there. I assume that’s because he likes working with you. Learning from the person he considers the best in the field.”

Grace’s words are both heartening and discouraging.

Despite my better judgment, I care about Aiden. More than I should, obviously, but taking our night together out of the equation, he’s an intelligent young man that I want to succeed, and I’m in a position to help him with that.

I’m happy to learn his mood has picked up somewhat because he’s excited about the professional experiences he’s getting. But I’m disheartened to hear that he’s still notably depressed.

I see that myself, of course. The dark circles under his eyes are hard to miss, and the listless expression when he walks the halls borders on haunting. I didn’t realize other people saw it too, though. I figured I noticed because I’m so in tune to him, not because it’s clear as day.

Yet, like Grace said, I don’t know what I can do about it.

Pursuing anything personal with him is out of the question. Even though I’m not technically his professor, I’m a mentor of sorts since he’s helping me with my research, and his boss, in a manner of speaking. If he weren’t enrolled here maybe things would be different. *Maybe*. But that’s a moot point since the man still needs his degree.

I could ask for another assistant, but if I do, that will reflect poorly on Aiden. And he can’t give the position up without the same result since I’m the only professor here working in the field he wants to concentrate on.

Not to mention, there’s the little issue of his lie. Even knowing why he did it, I don’t know if I can forgive it. For months, I thought the connection we had was totally organic. Born of the mutual, intense onset of comfort and lust and trust. But that encounter wasn’t as organic as I believed considering I was already familiar to him, so a part of me will always

wonder if he'd have offered to buy that drink if I really was a stranger.

Sipping my beer, I conclude my only option is to maintain the status quo. Our hands are tied professionally speaking, which means there's no option for anything personal, even if that was something I wanted to pursue.

Lost in my thoughts, I don't realize Daniel has worked his way to my side until his voice brings me back to the bar. "What are you two talking about over here?"

"Aiden Sinclair," Grace volunteers, too freely in my opinion. "I was asking how Kier liked him as an assistant."

"Is it a good or bad sign you looked so deep in thought?" Daniel asks.

"Good. I was trying to think if there's anything he can't do, and I couldn't come up with anything," I fib, hoping Grace doesn't recall the last thing she said about him was that he's still not himself.

"Jennifer used to rave about him," Daniel offers. "I was hoping to get him myself before you got here."

"Isn't your focus information security? That's not his area of interest, correct?" I ask.

"No, but who wouldn't want the smartest student in the department as their assistant. Besides, he's nice to look at."

I set my glass on the table so hard a quarter of the liquid sloshes out of it. *How dare he talk about Aiden like that.*

"Whoa, you okay?" Daniel asks.

"I thought the table was further away." I reach for some napkins to mop the spill, hoping he bought that excuse, and that my face doesn't betray what I really thought about that comment. "Is that something we're allowed to say about the students?"

"I don't see why not. It's just an observation." Daniel shrugs nonchalantly. "Besides, the students say it about you, too."

"Me?" My palms are suddenly sweaty.

The last thing I need is to be mixed up in gossip about attractive students and teachers.

“Professor Dreamy.” Daniel confirms. “It’s a little unoriginal, but this is the computer science department, so...” He sips his martini instead of finishing the thought.

“I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that,” I sputter, wondering if Aiden’s among the students who use that moniker. *He wouldn’t be that careless, right?*

“It’s harmless,” Daniel insists. “Right Grace?”

“It probably shouldn’t be encouraged—workplace ethics and all that—but I understand what you’re trying to say. Attractive people tend to draw attention, and in the case of students, nicknames.” She gives me a slightly embarrassed look, as if this isn’t the first time she’s heard the nickname they’ve assigned me.

“Well, I’d prefer not to talk about Aiden’s looks since that’s not why he’s my assistant,” I say.

Daniel has the decency to turn a little pink, so I decide not to harp on the issue any further, especially since I’m guilty of far more than just admiring Aiden’s looks. And I have no right to act as his protector.

If only I could stop thinking of him as mine.

Chapter Ten

Aiden

What's the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result?

I guess that means I'm losing my mind.

Day after day I go to work for Kier, researching and testing machine learning algorithms. But it's not this analysis that's repetitive. It's sitting in the room with Kier, pretending like I'm immune to his proximity. Like my spirit isn't crushed each time he gives me something to do without looking me in the eye, as if we're nothing more than work associates.

I know that's all we're supposed to be, but that's not all we are. It never will be. Not unless we could somehow erase that night. And I'd rather suffer through these torturous hours for eternity, pretending my body doesn't crave his with a need so visceral it literally shakes, than delete it from my memory.

Still, I can't deny that each time I set foot in this room, I hope for a different result. I hope today will be the one his eyes finally meet mine. Or his fingers brush affectionately against my skin. Hell, I'd even settle for a smile, whether it's directed at me or not. Anything other than the vacant, expressionless mask he forces himself to wear around me.

Foot bouncing under the desk, I hunch over the keyboard, typing. Though my body is high-strung, my mind is

surprisingly calm. I love what I'm doing, which is probably the only reason I haven't tipped into a full-blown breakdown. Numbers bring me purpose, help me focus, so that the need to scream in frustration and despair fades, and I momentarily forget that my life is so bleak.

That more often than not, I go through the entire day without talking to a single other person.

Five out of six of my roommates are consumed with classes and football right now—even though Bennet's technically still recovering from an injury he's still at practices—and the sixth works just like I do. Our schedules don't line up very well, and even when we're all home, I go out of my way to stay in my room, so I don't have to watch three happy couples cuddled on the couch while I sit by myself, like a little island. I'm not even avoiding Bennet and Damien specifically; I'm avoiding anything that might serve as a stark reminder of what I don't have.

As for work and classes, they're pretty solitary activities, so I don't even have to isolate myself if I don't feel like talking. I can slip into and out of class without socializing if I'm not in the mood to chat, which I do more often than not since I'm not sure I can muster the energy to sound happy.

That wasn't always the case. I used to exchange pleasantries with my classmates. Talk shop about the things we're learning. Occasionally, I still do, but mostly I just sit at the desk, take my notes, and leave. Besides, Kier is the best person for me to talk to about what I'm learning or working on, and he limits his communication to emails. Even if we're sitting in the same room. He'd rather write a message than engage in any dialogue.

Speaking of, a notification pops up on my screen that I've got a new one, so I click into it and read that Kier is providing me with a sample gait to use in my work. There's an attachment containing the LEGSys analysis of a stride that he'd like me to teach my algorithm to recognize.

Theoretically, the algorithm should recognize and differentiate between different gait patterns to adapt to the one

the wearer is using at that moment. A leisurely stroll, a brisk walk, etcetera. The goal is to have the prosthetic seamlessly adjust to the user to maintain a natural stride.

It's an exciting assignment, the kind of thing I envisioned doing when I learned about this field and decided to focus on it, yet I sigh heavily as I read his instructions. *What I wouldn't give to talk to him about this instead of getting these impersonal emails.*

The soft click of a door latching shut tells me someone has entered the room, and the way my skin pebbles tells me it's Kier. I don't even have to look up to confirm it.

Every once in a while someone else will use this lab, but more often than not it's just the two of us in here. Sitting at our desks, staring at our workstations, not even acknowledging the other. It's so uncomfortable yet so routine my body seems to recognize when Kier's the person in the room simply by the way it tenses and hums with a restless energy.

So far, I've been able to expel that energy with subtle movements. Rubbing my fingers together, chewing my lip, bouncing my foot. It gets harder every day though, the buildup of tension mounting. I'm afraid of what might happen when there's no room left to store it. Will I knock my papers off the desk? Kick the chair? Scream?

Only time will tell.

The scrape of a chair sliding over the tile floor echoes around the room, once as it's pulled out, the other as it scoots in.

My nerves twitch with the urge to turn and look at him, but I force my head to remain facing forward. If I look, I'll stare. And if I stare, I might break down. So, I dutifully peck away at the keyboard while my heart thumps a nervous beat in my chest, just like...

I stifle a gasp as I press my hand to that fitful organ.

"Can you feel my heart trying to beat out of my chest?" I whisper breathlessly, my body flush with Kier's as we both try to come down from our orgasms.

“Can you feel mine?”

Going still, I’m able to hear the rhythmic thumping. “Yes.”

The memory is so vivid it’s like I’m still in that hotel room. Still laying on top of Kier as we try to process the intensity of the moment, and realizing as he held me that nothing had ever felt as right as being in his arms.

God this hurts. Will there ever be a time that it doesn’t feel like my chest is splayed open?

“Aiden!”

My head snaps up when I hear my name, the blurry room slowly coming into focus. I’m a little disoriented, which is jarring to say the least, but not nearly as shocking as the fact Kier is standing less than two feet away, eyes wide with... *panic?*

“Yeah?” I croak.

“What happened?” *Is his voice shaking?*

“What do you mean?”

“You tell me. You gasped and then froze, and then sort of slumped like you were about to faint.” Kier’s icy blue eyes have lost their alarmed edge, but they still regard me warily, as if he’s not sure I’m in the clear. His worry floods my body with a warmth I haven’t felt since... Since that night in his room, when he made me feel alive.

“I—” my hand moves from my chest to my forehead, probing, “—don’t know.” The last thing I remember is... not something I want to share with him. So, I play dumb.

“You don’t know? Are you sick?” Kier’s hand seems to stretch toward my arm before he abruptly pulls it back, and even though we don’t touch, my arm tingles where he would have made contact.

“I don’t think so.”

“Hungry? When was the last time you ate?”

I shake my head to clear the fog. “This morning?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?” A wavy line mars his forehead as his gaze skims over me, and I momentarily forget the question, his beautiful face so close it consumes every thought.

“I don’t know,” I finally answer.

I’m pretty sure I did eat this morning, but that was hours ago, and I have no memory of what I may have consumed. The only thing I remember right now is feeling like I was transported back to that hotel room right before everything went fuzzy, and I am *not* going to admit that to Kier.

“Stay here,” he says softly, striding across the room to get a cup of water from the dispenser by the door, and setting it on the desk in front of me. “Drink.”

Hand shaking slightly, I reach for the water and bring it to my lips, keenly aware of the fact Kier’s eyes seem to linger there while I sip. I almost wish I didn’t notice, since that makes my heart give another erratic little beat.

“You look exhausted. You should take the rest of the day off. Do you have anyone who could come get you? One of your roommates?”

I shake my head curtly.

“Are you still having a problem with one of them?” *Is that concern I hear in his voice?*

My eyes snap to his. “You remember that?”

He averts his gaze as he says, “I remember you were avoiding one of them for some reason. Are you still?”

This is the last thing I want to be talking about with Kier, but we *are* talking, so I lick my lips and nod. “Not for the thing that happened before, right around when I met you, but yeah.”

“Are you, um, in danger or anything?” Kier glances nervously at me before looking away again.

“No. Bennet would never hurt me. Not physically.”

“He has though? Hurt you?” There’s a growly edge to Kier’s voice that doesn’t match the skittish way he’s avoiding my eyes.

“Not intentionally.”

“How do you unintentionally hurt someone?”

“By being oblivious to my feelings and dating someone else,” I snort, slapping a hand over my mouth as soon as the words are out.

I can’t believe I just admitted that. I blame my... I blame Kier. Words just spill out of my mouth when I’m around him.

Kier’s still not looking at me when I find the courage to look at him, but his lips are moving slightly, in the absent-minded way I’ve come to realize they do when he’s thinking. Doing math. Then his jaw seems to tense.

“You were hung up on someone else when we met.”

“I—thought I was, yeah.” I sip my water, the sound of my swallowing the only noise in the room for a beat.

“So, I was a rebound?”

Is he...jealous?

“You were the reason I figured out what I felt for Bennet was appreciation that I misinterpreted as something more.”

“Meaning?”

I worry my lip while I search for the right words. “Before you he was the only other person who made me feel seen. But not in the same way. He’s a popular jock who accepted that I’m a gay nerd, and because of his example other people accepted me. I had a hero worship thing going on as a result. I was a little infatuated. Only I thought it was something more.”

“And you realized you misinterpreted that how?”

Fuck it. This all started because I said I wouldn’t hide my feelings if I was into someone, I’m not going to back down now. “Because it’s not even a fraction of what I feel for you.”

Kier squeezes his eyes shut and holds his breath for a count of three. “Aiden—”

“I know. But you asked. And anyway, it’s the truth.”

He nods almost imperceptibly, acknowledging but not agreeing with me. “That night was intense, I’m not going to pretend otherwise, but remember why it happened in the first place. You knew who I was. You’d been following my work. How do you know what you feel now isn’t rooted in the same kind of hero worship you just admitted you misinterpreted once before?”

The question stings even though it’s a fair one. What’s worse, I’m not even sure I can give him an answer he’ll accept since it’s all based on feelings, and we’re trained to rely on facts. Still, I may never get another chance, so I give it a try.

“Before we met, I admired your work. I thought you were brilliant, and yes, I found you attractive, but I wouldn’t characterize it as hero worship. You were a model for my career aspirations, nothing more. And yes, I asked to buy you that drink because you’re someone I admire, but everything that happened after that was a result of two people making an organic connection. I’ll admit to being a little shocked that someone as brilliant and accomplished as you was interested in me, but I’m not confusing how I feel about Kier the bio-mechatronics expert and Kier the man because only one of them was in the room that night. That’s how I know my feelings aren’t being misinterpreted.”

I hold my breath, waiting to see how he’ll respond. And for several, agonizing minutes, he doesn’t. Then he looks at me with tortured eyes. “I needed to hear that, but at the same time I wish I didn’t know the truth because—”

“Because it doesn’t change anything,” I finish for him.

He shakes his head slowly.

“Even knowing why you lied, why you can trust your feelings this time around, there’s a clear conflict of interest here,” he says.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” I hate how desperate I sound.

“For me, my reputation might take a bit of a hit. I’d never teach again, but I could find another job. For you, you might not get to that first job. Maybe you don’t even graduate.”

“You’re not even technically my teacher.” My voice is so soft even I can barely hear it.

“But I am a mentor, so you’d be accused of getting special treatment, even if it weren’t true. That stigma would follow you, make people question why they should hire you, and my recommendation would mean nothing.”

“Even after I graduate? Wouldn’t things be different then?” My damp eyes find his equally defeated ones.

“I don’t know the answer to that. Depending on whether you go for a masters, go straight into a job... There are too many factors to say for sure.”

I have so many objections to make, all of which I know are futile, because he’s right. Nothing changes, no matter how much we might wish otherwise. It’s so disheartening I can’t even find my voice. All I can do is nod.

“Take the afternoon off. Get some rest.” He sounds as tired as I feel. “It’s going to be a long year.”

Chapter Eleven

Kier

OCTOBER

After our little heart-to-heart Aiden and I aren't avoiding each other the way we did at first, but things are still awkward.

I basically admitted to having feelings for him, and he did the same, which has made things both better and worse. Better in the sense that we no longer work in silence, although we only discuss our research. By unspoken agreement we don't talk about the things that endeared us to one another in the first place, like movies and sports teams. We don't venture into new territory either, like favorite foods or weekend plans. Everything said aloud is limited to the data we're reviewing, leaving no room for emotion to creep in.

Theoretically.

But since we're both passionate about work, even those conversations make my feelings grow, which almost makes things worse than they were to begin with.

Aiden speaks my language. Sometimes he'll finish my thoughts. Others he'll pose a timely theory. His grasp of a complex subject is remarkable, especially given his age, and since he's driven by a desire to do good rather than to make money or accumulate power, his motivation is admirable.

I'm awed by his mind. His heart. His beauty. Everything. So much so, I think even if we hadn't met before, I'd still find myself wanting him in ways I shouldn't.

Sitting at my desk, reading the comments he made on a student's paper—comments exactly like what I would make had I been the first one to read it—I can't help wondering what might've happened if I wasn't so willing to get to Colorado.

Ours is a niche field. One that would've eventually brought us into contact with one another, and if I'd just had more patience, maybe our second meeting would have been as potential colleagues instead of a mentor and his charge. We'd have been free to resume exactly where we left off without any consequences.

Of course, that would have meant at least a year of wondering. Pining for a man I didn't know how to find and feeling distraught most of the time, but I feel like that now, so... Which is worse, the not knowing or the knowing with your hands helplessly bound?

Not for the first time, Aiden's question about where we'd stand after graduation surfaces.

If one or both of us is no longer at Front Range University, that would seemingly eliminate any roadblocks, provided I have no further part in his education or career. Unfortunately, the fact we're both here now means there's going to be some overlap.

Should he want to pursue a higher degree, my recommendation will open that door. Should he want to go straight into the workforce, once again it's my influence that will make that happen. I can't withhold my opinion about his capabilities without damaging his opportunities for advancement, but by the same token any praise I bestow will lose its meaning if we're together.

At the very least, I have to give him a referral for whatever he chooses to do, so people don't question why he didn't deserve one. And once that referral is made, I'd have to give him time to prove himself to whomever he's reporting to, be that another professor or a boss.

At best that puts us at least a year away from pursuing the feelings we have. At worst, two. Neither scenario holds much appeal, but I don't see any other options.

My phone dings, reminding me that I'm due in the lab in five minutes.

If it wouldn't raise some eyebrows, I'd plan my day so that Aiden and I would be there separately, but in addition to the fact my colleagues would question the effectiveness of having an assistant that doesn't actively assist me... I don't want to. As torturous as it is to be in the same room and not act on the urge to touch him, the thought of not seeing him at all is just as unappealing.

Aiden's head is bowed when I arrive, focused on the phone he holds on his lap. That in and of itself is odd—he's not the type to waste time scrolling aimlessly—though it's the strange voice coming from the speaker that really captures my interest. It's both nasally and authoritative, demanding attention.

He's so engrossed he doesn't even hear me approach or realize I'm peering over his shoulder like a creep until I exclaim, "What the hell is that?"

Aiden jolts, dropping the phone to the floor with a clatter. Since it lands near my foot, I pick it up, getting a closer look at the... *fish* on the screen.

"Breaking news!" the fish declares, then launches into a story about the upcoming election.

Aiden grabs the phone and silences it before I can fully comprehend what I'm seeing. His face is red as he pockets it and turns on the computer with a hurried, "Sorry."

"What was that?" His flustered movements have my curiosity piqued.

"Just a news clip."

"About what?"

"The democratic nominee picking a running mate." His fingers fly over the keyboard, entering his password.

"When did that happen?" I ask.

“Just now.”

“But...” I debate whether to ask about what I thought I saw, and decide I need to know. “Wasn’t that a fish on your phone?”

“Yeah.” Even the back of his neck is red.

“So, it’s a parody?”

“No, it’s real.”

Just then my phone pings, and I see an Apple News notification that a running mate has been selected.

Now I’m really confused.

“Do you have some sort of goofy filter on your phone? Is that why the reporter looked like a fish?”

Aiden props his elbows on the desk and rests his head in his hands, talking to the keyboard rather than me. “It’s not a filter. It’s Real Talking Fish. He anchors Bikini Bottom News.”

I’ve never heard a more ridiculous string of words come from Aiden’s mouth. Positive I heard wrong; I parrot the sentence back to him. “Real Talking Fish anchors Bikini Bottom News.”

“Yeah.” He sighs dejectedly.

“I don’t understand.”

Aiden digs his phone from his pocket, taps the screen a few times, and hands it to me.

The fish on the screen booms, “Breaking News. Florida issues a state of emergency as Tropical Storm Bella threatens to make landfall.”

“What tropical storm?” I ask.

Aiden finally looks at me with an incredulous expression. “Don’t you pay attention to the weather? News of the storm is all over the place.”

“I uh, haven’t been following the news lately. It’s usually over by the time I get home and I’m asleep before the late news starts.”

Nothing says lame like admitting to the man you like that your pathetic life revolves around work.

“I don’t watch the news either. That’s why I follow this.” He nods at the phone I’m holding.

“But this is a fish.”

“He’s surprisingly informative.” Aiden’s brow wrinkles, as though even he’s shocked to admit that despite it being his phone I’m looking at.

“I don’t understand.” I watch another clip, this time about an asteroid that will circle the earth. “Bikini Bottom... isn’t that a SpongeBob thing?”

“Trust me, I get it.” Aiden puffs out his cheeks as he exhales. “I thought the same thing when I first saw it, but Bikini Bottom News is timely and accurate, with zero spin. It’s the fastest, least biased way to stay informed.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Just... Watch it.” He goes back to typing, still as red as he was a few minutes ago, so I take the phone to my desk and scroll through the old clips.

I can’t independently verify anything since I rarely see the news myself, but a quick search on every story turns up a piece with the same information, so clearly this fish reports actual news. And just like Aiden said, there’s never any spin to it. No underlying message to make the viewer lean one way or another. It’s impressive really.

And like everything else about him, this little quirk makes me like him even more.

Getting news from a fish is silly. Whimsical almost, yet totally legitimate at the same time. It’s a perfect fit for Aiden, who’s brilliant without being overly serious.

His phone unlocked and, in my hand, the temptation to snoop is overwhelming. Not to pry, just to feel closer to him in a way I can’t allow myself to chase through conversation. I want to learn everything I can about him, and even though I’d rather do that organically, the urge to find out by any available

means is near compulsive. But I refrain, knowing that would only make the next several months worse, and in the end, it would rob me of learning about him through his own lips.

Shutting off the screen, I cross the room to hand the phone back to him, offering the most innocent smile I can muster when he takes it. “This does actually seem legitimate.”

The tension in his shoulders seems to fade somewhat, like he’s relieved to have my approval. “Believe me, I know how hard that is to admit.”

“How did you even find this?”

“One of my roommates. He absorbs information best in short, to-the-point doses, and this is how he gets all his news. I tried to poke holes in it, but it’s honestly airtight. Sometimes they even break things before more traditional sources.” He traps his lips between his teeth to hide a bashful smile.

“Unbelievable,” I mutter, getting momentarily distracted by the way that innocent gesture plumps and darkens his enticing mouth.

God, what I wouldn’t give to feel those lips on mine right now.

“So—” I clear my throat “—any progress on that sample you’ve been working on.

Work. Talk about work.

Aiden opens a file and starts pointing out how the algorithm correlates to the data he has, pausing at intervals to gauge whether I agree or disagree. When he’s finished going over his findings I say, “That was my assessment as well.”

“You have me working on the same project as you? Isn’t that redundant?”

“Not when you consider we’re trying to help this patient regain his natural gait instead of the stilted one his current prosthetic gives him. Everything has to be perfect, so I needed another set of eyes on it.”

“And you trust my eyes to do that?” His molten caramel gaze meets mine, and there’s so much reverence in them I

nearly forget to answer.

“Of course I do.”

“But.” His long lashes brush against his cheeks as he blinks repeatedly. “I’m just your assistant.”

“So? Do you know how gifted you are? Half the time you finish my thoughts for me and the other you have them first. You could have a career that surpasses mine. I wouldn’t trust my father’s care to anyone else.”

“Your father?” Aiden gasps, and I realize my mistake.

He wasn’t supposed to know this prosthetic is for my dad. Not because it’s confidential or anything, but because that’s a personal detail like the ones we’re trying to avoid. And I didn’t just reveal a tiny detail about myself by telling him who the patient is, I admitted I value his opinion as much as, if not more than, my own.

“He lost his leg in a car accident years ago.” I try to skirt over the gravity of my earlier comments. “He was a runner, and while he can still run with his current prosthetic, he says he doesn’t feel like himself with it.”

“That’s how you got into this field.” Aiden puts two and two together. It’s not a stretch, but it’s also something I don’t share since there’s enough pressure to get this right without an entire industry watching.

Several people obviously know my dad benefits from my work, they just don’t know we’ve yet to build him something that feels as real as his leg did, and that I plan to keep fine tuning the algorithm until I can give that back to him.

No point in hiding that from Aiden now.

“Yes. I want to help everyone regain their mobility, but he’s the reason I want to make prosthetics feel like normal limbs.”

He’s quiet for a minute as he absorbs my words. “Thank you for trusting me,” he whispers.

I don’t know how to respond to that without saying something I shouldn’t, something that will only draw attention

to the depth of the feelings I have to keep buried for my sanity and his. So, I merely nod and go back to my workstation.

“Remind me never to say yes when it’s Grace’s turn to pick the location,” I tell Daniel with a heavy sigh. “My ears are going to ring for days.”

“It’s not that bad,” my colleague replies. “Some of these people are really good.”

“Yeah, but for every one of them who can sing there are at least four that are tone deaf.” I shake my head as the next amateur takes the stage and belts out an off-key rendition of Party in the USA.

Karaoke has never been my thing, and now I’m reminded why.

“They ought to have a screening process,” I remark. “Or pass out earplugs at the door.”

“Someone’s in a mood.” Daniel hands me a shot off the table in front of us. “Maybe this will help.”

I’m not much of a drinker, but I do need to get out of my head, so I toss the shot back and wait for the liquor to work its magic while he rambles about some TV show he’s started bingeing.

I try to pay attention, I really do, but my heart just isn’t in it. As usual, Daniel seems to notice.

“Still stumped by your algorithm?” he asks, assuming that’s what’s got me out of sorts. I can’t blame him since that’s the explanation I give him each time he pops his head in to see what I’m up to, which happens almost daily.

Though I’ve been here over a month, I’m still not entirely sure if that’s a friendly colleague thing or a hint that he wants something more. In case it’s the latter I should probably figure that out, and discourage it, I just haven’t had the time or desire to think about him at all. My mind is too full of all things Aiden.

The way he looked at me earlier, when he learned he was helping me find solutions for my dad... It stole my breath. I could see it in his eyes, in the way his lips parted on a gasp. He was flattered. Honored. Like my faith in him was the greatest gift he could receive.

I damn near pulled him into my arms right then and there. I've never had to fight my body so hard. I'm still tense over it, hours later.

"It's still giving me trouble, yes." I perpetuate that little white lie about the algorithm.

"Haven't you ever heard that solutions come when you're *not* looking for them?" Daniel arches a knowing brow. "Get your mind off it and you'll probably have a breakthrough. What song are you going to sing?"

"I'm not singing."

"Oh, come on. You can't be any worse than he is." He tilts his head toward the stage, where a man is butchering Saturday Sun.

"I'll still pass."

"Ugh, fine. But at least put work away for tonight." Daniel bumps my shoulder with his, trying to get me to loosen up.

"I'll try."

Sipping on my beer, I try to enjoy watching my colleges goof off, clapping when they take the stage and toasting them when they come off. For about twenty minutes I'm blissfully Aiden free. And then a group comes in, six men paired off like couples, with Aiden bringing up the rear.

My stomach plummets when I see his face, the forced smile a dead giveaway he's uncomfortable. Feeling like a third wheel no doubt. Then one of the men leans toward him, speaking into his ear with obvious familiarity. I'd bristle at that if it weren't for the fact the man has his fingers entwined with someone else, so I conclude the gesture is to be heard over the music, nothing more.

Then the man straightens, and I get a good look at him. He's... *me*. A little taller, a little bulkier, but... *me*. And a brief glance at Aiden's stiff grin confirms what my gut already knows. That's Bennet, the roommate he thought he was in love with, until I came along.

Feelings aren't misinterpreted my ass.

Chapter Twelve

Aiden

“Want the usual?” Bennet leans next to my ear so I can hear him over the music.

It’s not overly loud, but you either have to raise your voice or lean close to have a conversation in the dimly lit room punctuated with dark wood tables and an equally dark bar. I’d probably like it at a lower volume.

“I’ll get it.”

“Don’t be weird. Look, Damien’s already got the bartender’s attention.” He points to where his boyfriend has found a spot at the bar.

“Yeah, fine.” I nod and try to smile.

Karaoke is the last thing I wanted to do tonight, but Damien got some weird bug up his ass that he wanted to try it, then Jagger jumped on the bandwagon because it would be good material for his socials, and then Bennet mandated that the whole house needed to go.

Well, he mandated that *I* had to go. Everyone else was willing, and he said he was tired of me hiding out in my room studying and one night of fun wouldn’t tank my GPA or anything. I still declined of course, but Damien guilted me into joining by telling me Bennet misses me, and while that

statement doesn't have the same effect on me it would have before meeting Kier, it did make me feel like shit for avoiding my best friend. So, here I am, the third wheel in public.

At least my roommates are less likely to cuddle here than the living room, so that alone might make the evening more tolerable.

Bennet hands me a glass and rests his hand on Damien's back as they start to weave their way toward an empty table. I move to follow, but I don't make it two steps before I spot a very beautiful, very brooding Kier Caldwell storming my way.

What the hell is he doing here?

"A word?" Kier grips my elbow and steers me toward the far corner of the bar, leaving me no choice but to keep pace with him, especially since there's a break in the karaoke. The house music isn't nearly as loud, and I'm guessing we're not about to have a conversation he wants people to overhear, so it's best to retreat.

"Kier," I stutter when we come to a stop. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" His velvety voice has a raspy edge to it. "I just saw you walk in here with a guy that looks like he could be my younger brother, that's what's wrong."

Try as I might, I can't make sense of that statement. I came here with six others, although only Bennet's tried to speak to me since we walked through the door. Could that...?

"Are you talking about Bennet? You know who he is?"

"I may be a genius, but I didn't have to be to figure that out." Kier rolls his eyes, something I've never seen him do, which has me even more baffled.

"I'm not following."

"Really?" Kier's sapphire pools are icy cold despite the heat in the room, and I find myself shivering as much from their cool regard as from the ethereal quality they give him. "You're not following why I would take issue with the fact that I'm a doppelganger for Bennet? You said your misinterpreted feelings for him were nothing like your feelings for me, but

from where I'm standing, I look like a pretty good stand in for the man you thought you loved."

My eyes get so wide I have to blink to keep the rush of air from making them water.

"You think...? But you two look nothing alike."

"Really?" Kier crosses his arms in front of his chest. "Tall, black hair, blue eyes. Aside from the thirty pounds of muscle he's carrying he could *be* me."

"I don't..." I shake my head back and forth, wondering how he could possibly think I'd confuse him with Bennet when they're night and day. Bennet is striking, but Kier's beauty is blinding, like the sun.

"Come on, Aiden. We'd pass for each other in a lineup. Tell me again how he has nothing to do with the way you feel about me?"

"He... I..."

"There you are," Bennet says as he comes to stand next to Kier, shooting him a questionable glance as Kier tries to school his features to a blank expression. "What happened?" he asks me.

"I bumped into Kier."

"Kier..." Bennet's eyes narrow slightly, flaring wide as recognition hits. "The guy who wrote that book, right? No wonder you seem familiar. I remember your picture from the book jacket."

Bennet holds his hand out, and Kier takes it with the smile I've come to learn is the one he gives the public. The one that touches his mouth not his eyes. It looks genuine, and to some degree I'm sure it is, but it's not joyful. Just... polite.

"You read it?" Kier asks.

"God no." Bennet laughs. "It's way above my head. He tried to put it in terms I'd understand—" Bennet gives me an up-nod "—but the only thing I got was Luke Skywalker's arm. That sounds cool as shit even though I don't get how it all works."

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” Kier says.

“Too bad you don’t have your book here. I bet he’d autograph it,” Bennet tells me before facing Kier. “What are you doing here? Are you giving a lecture on campus or something.”

There’s my cue to blush.

“Kier works here. I sort of work for him doing research.”

I’ve never seen Bennet’s expression fall so fast. “You’re working for a rockstar science guy and didn’t tell me? That’s like your dream.”

A quick glance at Kier tells me he’s just as interested in my answer as Bennet is, for different reasons.

“You’ve had so much going on with your rehab and classes and Damien...” I trail off, realizing how lame that sounds.

“Is this because I kept him a secret from you? You’re keeping secrets of your own to get back at me.”

“What? No.” I can’t admit the truth without jeopardizing Kier’s reputation or mine, but if I say nothing at all I risk Kier thinking that’s because I still have feelings for Bennet. “I’m not keeping score and I’m not trying to keep Kier a secret, I just—”

How do I fix this?

“The things we’re working on are confidential,” Kier tells Bennet as I gape at him. “Aiden probably didn’t say anything because he didn’t want to say too much.”

“Oh,” Bennet says, clearly flustered. “I’m... Shit, I’m sorry Aiden. I shouldn’t have accused you of that.”

“It’s okay,” I mumble, still reeling from the fact Kier just came to my defense.

“Mind if I finish talking to Aiden real quick?” Kier asks Bennet. “I won’t take long since he’s technically off the clock.”

“Yeah, sure.” Bennet offers a somewhat embarrassed smile. “Nice to meet you.”

When he's several feet away Kier turns his focus back to me, a crisp line separating his brows. But before he can say anything I blurt, "Why did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Cover for me with Bennet."

"I did it as much for me as I did you. He can't know about what happened between us, but I'm sure as hell curious why you'd keep quiet about working for me. There's no need to keep that a secret unless you really are still hung up on him and don't want him to know you've been with anyone else."

"That's not why I didn't tell him."

"Why didn't you?" Kier's lips are pressed into a thin line, waiting for my answer.

"Bennet knows me better than anyone on this campus. The more I talk to him, the greater the chance he sees through me. And if he sees through me, he won't give up until he gets to the bottom of what's wrong."

"And what's wrong?" There's just enough curiosity in his voice that I can tell he's questioning whether it's him or Bennet that has me upset.

"I want what I can't have." I hold his wary stare, leaving no doubt what—or who—that is. "And I hide out in my room because reminders of that are all over my house."

"The people you came in with?" His expression softens some.

"Three happy couples." I nod.

Kier closes his eyes and sighs heavily. "Thin walls."

"You remembered." I chuckle without any humor. "But that's not the main reason I avoid them. It's all the other things. Cooking together, watching TV. Random boring shit that they can share with another person. I don't want that with Bennet, but I do want it."

Once again, I'm saying far more than intended, but I just can't seem to keep it bottled in with Kier.

Some of the tension seems to leave his shoulders, though his expression is still guarded. “I hear you, but it’s hard to believe. I mean, we were just standing side-by-side, do you really not see the similarities?”

“I really don’t,” I insist. “I mean, I guess I can see why you’d think I have a physical type, and maybe I do, I don’t know. But you have your personality, and he has his. Those aren’t similar at all, and I think that’s why I don’t think you two look anything alike.”

Kier nods, but he doesn’t volunteer anything, almost as if he doesn’t trust himself with what he might say.

Taking a leap, I guess what his words might be. “You thought I didn’t mean it. That my feelings for him aren’t a fraction of what they are for you.”

He presses his lips together firmly and gives me a quick, curt nod.

“I know you’re afraid to trust me on this, and I get why.” I keep pressing forward. “But honestly, rather than being jealous of Bennet you should be grateful. Without him, I might not be able to say with absolute certainty that what I feel for you is more than the infatuation I felt for him. It’s—”

“Hey, looking way too serious over here,” Professor Daniel Kincaid sidles up to Kier, who once again seems to stiffen slightly. I don’t blame him. Professor Kincaid is nice and all, but I don’t think he grasps the concept of personal space as well as he should. And given his proximity to *my* man—yeah, I said it—I tense as well.

“That algorithm thing has you both in a fog. Put it away for the night.”

“Hi, Professor,” I mumble, doing my best to look happy to see him.

“Aiden,” he beams. “You should’ve been my TA. I’d never have you talking about work on a Friday night.”

Kier’s jaw is clenched so tight you could almost convince me it’s wired shut.

“Maybe next semester,” I say.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Kier barks. “If you want to work in prosthetics, you’d be far better off staying put.”

“The boy’s only trying to be polite.” Professor Kincaid winks at me before turning to face Kier. “The department wants to do a group song, so your presence is required. No excuses.”

Jaw still rigid, Kier nods at me. “Aiden. I’ll see you next week.”

“Yes, sir.” I watch as Kier is led away, then make my way to my roommates’ table. Fortunately, it’s just to the side of a pillar that keeps Kier’s table out of view, so even though I’m tempted to look his way, it’s too futile to try.

Oddly, that doesn’t make me anxious or distraught. Not after what just transpired.

Kier still wants me, just as much as I want him. I’ve wanted to believe that for months, but now I know it’s true. And while we may not be able to act on it now, I’m more confident than ever that when the time is right, we will.

Chapter Thirteen

Kier

NOVEMBER

After that near confession from Aiden about how he feels, all pretenses went out the window. No more talking about work and only work, now we talk about anything and everything.

Except how we feel.

That's the one subject we both know is off limits, so by mutual—unspoken—agreement we don't acknowledge it.

We don't have to. We both know the score. Until his graduation, nothing changes. After that...somehow we'll be together. That hasn't been said in so many words, but we both know it's true. We just have to be patient.

It's agonizing not only to pretend we aren't completely smitten, but to act like we aren't either. As a result, there are far too many longing looks, painful sighs, even the occasional *what if* from Aiden, a thought that never gets finished since my warning glare stops him from saying anything else.

Thank God it's usually just the two of us in the lab, because I'm fairly sure we're shit at hiding how we feel. But we're holding strong outside this room, rarely—if ever—coming into contact. That means we're spending an ungodly amount of

time in the lab, maximizing every last second we can spend together, but it's the best we can do under the circumstances.

As I wait for Aiden to arrive, I absentmindedly review the numbers on my screen, thinking more about what we might talk about than what the data means.

Whipped, thy name is Kier.

I'm still gob smacked by all this. The depth of my feelings after a single night is one thing, but where they are now? Counting the minutes until I can see him. Constantly fighting the urge to touch him so we don't cross any lines. Daydreaming about what we might become once the barriers between us are gone, whenever that may be.

That's the hardest part of all this, the unknown. Aiden has applied to several schools where he might pursue his masters, and he's also put feelers out to a few companies. Regardless of which path he chooses, he'll receive a recommendation from me, and we both know that to avoid the perception of special treatment he'll need time to get established before we can act on our feelings. We just don't know how much time will be needed.

Compounding that is the fact I've got my own future decisions to make, and in many ways, those are contingent on where Aiden ends up.

The university would make room for me to stay here if I want, because my research can bring them notoriety, investors and new students. But how could I stay here if Aiden remains a student here, or anywhere else for that matter. Getting through this year will be hard enough. Add long distances to the equation and... Nope.

I could go back to my former position, assuming Aiden chooses a school or a company near Boston, but the only suitable company is the one I'd be working for, so while that's not a deal-breaker, it does suggest that we'll have to tread carefully so we don't violate any policies about workplace relationships.

Who knew falling for someone in the same field would be so difficult?

Regardless of what the future holds, the one thing I know for certain is that I'll do whatever it takes to make sure Aiden is in it. All I wanted in coming to Colorado was a chance to see if he was everything I believed him to be that first night. Everything I believed we could be *together*. In many ways I've confirmed the former, but as for the latter...

I want that chance, even if I have to wait months for it. And while the days are passing, the end never seems to get any nearer.

Aiden bustles into the room, bringing the crisp scent of cool air with him, and hangs his jacket on the hook by the door.

"Hi." My whole body seems to exhale now that my eyes are on him.

"Hi." He breathes in return, standing close enough for me to see the tiny flecks of gold in his toffee eyes, but not close enough to touch.

Neither of us moves for a beat as we wage the familiar, internal battle over wanting to close the distance and knowing we can't. Usually, this ends when a forlorn sigh passes through Aiden's lips, and he goes to sit at his workstation where we talk from across the room. Today, that sigh doesn't come.

"I can't do it," he whispers.

Every nerve in my body goes on alert. "Can't do what?"

"Make it to graduation. I can't." He rubs his chest, a haunted look on his face. "It hurts too much."

My first instinct is to spring up from my chair and take him in my arms, holding him the way I've been dying to for months. But I ignore the pain in my own chest and try to rationalize our situation. "I know this is hard, but we have to wait until you have your degree."

"I can't make it that long."

He sounds so forlorn, my heart feels ready to crack, yet at the same time, I'm not sure where this is coming from. The

last few weeks—after the initial moment to mourn what we can't yet have—he's been the same confident, funny, sexy guy I spent the night with. And while we both obviously want more, he seemed comfortable in the knowledge that we'd get there one day.

This panic, or whatever it is, doesn't make sense.

"We have to. For our future."

"And what if the future doesn't look the way we want it to? What if you can't find a job where I go to school? Or what if we end up working at the same place but we aren't allowed to be together because *once again* you'd be my supervisor or mentor. Then we'd have given up now *and* later."

"I won't let either of those things happen. I have a lot of clout, in both the academic world and the business world. One way or another I'll make it so nothing stands in our way. We just have to get through your graduation, Leanbh."

Some of the tension leaves him when I use his nickname, but it doesn't bring a smile to his face the way it usually does.

"Where's this coming from? What happened?" I prod gently.

Aiden's shoulders droop. "Bennet's been on my case about working too hard. He wants me to go home with him and Damien for Thanksgiving, and Damien thinks they should set me up on a date."

No!

I start to lurch for him but stop myself before I can get all the way off my stool, knowing if I get him in my arms, I won't be able to let go.

"What did you tell them?" I manage to keep my voice steadier than I feel.

"I said I was busy for Thanksgiving. And they haven't actually set me up yet, I just overheard them talking about it. If they do, I can't even tell them why I'd be saying no, yet saying no would just make Bennet more concerned."

There are any number of things I can do to diffuse his pain right now. Asking how I can help. Telling him this is all just

temporary. Reminding him that he knows how much I want him, even if I can't show it. But my mind keeps circling back to what he said about the future looking different than we want it to, alluding that the now is the only thing we can control.

What if he's right? What if I don't have the clout I think I do, or the best opportunity for him doesn't come with a corresponding opportunity for me?

The ugly truth is that we won't be in control of our personal lives unless we're in control of our professional ones, which will never happen if we work for other people.

Starting my own company is an idea I've toyed with off and on for years, but I never had a reason to take the leap since there were companies out there willing to provide the resources I needed. I've never loved the fact that those companies have to report to shareholders, meaning profits were often prioritized over progress, but my research is expensive, so I usually kept that opinion to myself lest I jeopardize the funding I received.

I don't love the notion of building a company, I'm a scientist not an entrepreneur, but if that gives me control of my destiny with Aiden...

Who was that guy that approached me a few years back with an idea for a new company? I politely declined since I was in the middle of a breakthrough with one of my algorithms, and I didn't want to split my attention between the research and starting a business. Now that I have Aiden, the research can continue even if I'm not doing it full time, so it's much more feasible to explore a startup without losing valuable time.

I wonder if that guy is still around somewhere.

As per usual, once an idea pops into my head it's damn near impossible to keep the wheels from turning. But Aiden's genuinely worried—about *us*—and I need to put his mind at ease.

Breaking all the rules I've set for us, I stretch my hand out. Aiden stares at it for a second, almost as if he's waiting for me

to take it back. When I don't, he puts his hand in mine, and I lace our fingers together.

"It's going to work out, Leanbh."

He gives me a timid smile.

"Where's that adventurous man I met at the bar? The one who stepped out of his comfort zone to buy me a drink."

"He's afraid of losing the thing he wants most in the world." His words cut straight to my heart, making it thud heavily in my chest. "Besides, I said I was *trying* to push my boundaries a little, not that I'd overcome them. I could be anyone I wanted that night because you wouldn't know any different, so it was a whole lot easier to act confident when you had no reason to think I wasn't. And plus, I didn't have anything to lose that night. Now..." His brow wrinkles as his words trail off.

I do actually get what he's saying about putting on a different face for me. It's one of the reasons I probably wouldn't have accepted his drink offer had I known I was familiar to him. It would've meant I had to be who he expected, and even though that's not much different than who I am, I still would've felt pressure to live up to his expectations.

And now, sometimes it's easier to act confident in front of strangers than to be vulnerable in front of friends, so the fact he's letting me see his fear just endears him to me that much more. Since that fear is losing *me*...

God, I wish I could kiss him right now.

"Do you trust me, Leanbh?"

"You know I do."

"Good. I have several plans. I don't know which will be the best option, but the only thing that's not an option is being kept apart from you any longer than necessary. Okay?"

The corner of Aiden's lip pulls up slightly as he nods. Then he squeezes my fingers and lets go, showing me some of the

strength I know is in there, even if he's not feeling it in spades right now.

"You know, you never told me why you call me that," he says.

"Leanbh?"

"Yeah. I know what it means—I looked it up—but why choose that for me?"

I've never stopped to consider this since it just felt right from the very start, but for once I don't have to analyze my answer before I give it. "That's what my dad has always called my mom. Even before I knew what it meant, the tone he used was so clearly special. Something reserved just for her. I'm not even sure he knew he was doing it, just like I didn't realize I was doing it with you at first. Once I did—" I shrug sheepishly "—that's just who you are to me."

"God, could you be any more perfect?" Aiden groans with an eye roll that's obviously intended to downplay the moment since he can't respond the way he wants.

"Maybe. I watched the first Spiderman movie." I wink in return.

Aiden's jaw drops in that way you see people do when they're exaggerating their surprise, which should be innocent enough, but gives me salacious flashbacks about what can fit in that mouth. I have to shake my head to clear it, so that memory doesn't lead to other untimely reactions.

"You watched an animated film? For me?"

"I told you I was starting to see them in a different light after you raved about Spiderman."

"And?" He's so eager for my response he rocks forward on the balls of his feet.

"I identified with the main character far more than I expected to."

"He's so real, don't you think?" Aiden's whisky eyes seem to sparkle. "And his struggle about trying to live up to his father's expectations... What man hasn't lived that himself?"

Not to mention, the animation is gritty instead of fluffy, so it feels more authentic.”

“Whoa,” I laugh. “I had no idea you were such a fanatic.”

He blushes adorably. “Okay, you might’ve uncovered one of my more juvenile pleasures. But don’t bring up my age. People twice as old love this movie.”

“A good story can be loved by all ages.” My eyes find his and hold his gaze.

“Exactly,” he says softly.

I’m pretty sure neither one of us is talking about the movie anymore.

Chapter Fourteen

Aiden

I'm not sure how much abstinence my body can take.

The fact I haven't had sex in over six months is only part of the problem. I've had dry spells before. Longer ones in fact. The real issue is that I have someone I want to be having sex with, which I can't act on, and I'm surrounded by people who fuck like rabbits.

Morning, noon and night, at least one of the couples in my house is going at it. Upstairs it's Bennet and Damien, and even if they're not overly vocal, the rocking bed—or couch if they've decided to change things up—makes the ceiling creak. Next door it's Cam and Jagger, who are mostly good about volume, but we share a wall, which shakes when the headboard hits it. And downstairs are Liam and Cruz, who are actually pretty quiet since they've been warned on multiple occasions to keep it down, but always come out of their room looking freshly fucked.

As a result, I feel sexually frustrated at least ninety percent of the time, and when you put me in a room with the very person my mind wanders to whenever I hear my roommates getting busy... To say that sitting in a room with Kier every day for hours on end is an exercise in restraint is a massive understatement.

If I'd never slept with him and had no idea what sex with him would be like I'd still be turned on around him because he's just so sexy. But having had a night with him... Knowing what an amazing lover he is... I'm desperate for a repeat. And since I'm surrounded by fucking couples—literally—I'm so wound up there are times I think Kier's heated looks alone could make me come.

The only reason I haven't totally lost my composure and jumped his bones is because I've started engaging in a little nightly self-care, which I'm presently administering right now as the wall behind me rattles with increasing speed.

Come to think of it, the ceiling seems to be creaking a bit too.

Everyone's leaving to go home for Thanksgiving in the morning, and even though each couple has plans to travel together, they seem to be treating tonight as their last chance for a romp before they have to behave for a few days, so the activities seem to be extra *vigorous* this evening.

This is one holiday I don't go home for since it generally takes place at my sister's house in Idaho, and not only is it a pain to get to, but I'd be relegated to the couch. I prefer to stay on campus and see everyone when I go to my parents for Christmas.

I love my sister and my niece and my brother-in-law but... the couch. Hard pass.

My roommates were concerned about me staying here without any company, but I told them I have plans with a classmate so they wouldn't worry about leaving. I'm pretty sure they suspect I don't have plans, but they didn't press me on it, which I appreciate since I'm looking forward to the quiet.

That, and I fully expect to see Kier at some point over the next few days. He knows I'm staying in town, and even though we have nothing planned, I'm betting we'll both end up in the lab since it's the only place we can see each other.

I'll take every chance I can get to see him. His silky black hair. Engaging blue eyes. Full lips I get lost in when he speaks, and that velvety voice that's as close as I can get to an embrace without actually touching.

He's sexy personified, and if all I can do right now is look, I plan to look my fill.

Though the soundtrack next door started this whole thing, it's the memory of Kier's weight on top of me, his body sliding languidly in and out of mine to get me used to his size, that has me instantly hard.

He was so gentle. So considerate. Until we both found our footing so to speak, and he made my body feel things I didn't know it was capable of. Feeling him tunnel inside me while he held my cock in his hand...

I've always done that to satisfy my partners, and they seemed to enjoy it well enough, but I never understood how intense it could be until it was done to me. The dual sensation of being filled and stroked was a euphoria unlike anything I've ever experienced. My release so all-consuming the world around me seemed to fade away, leaving me in a suspended state of bliss. And when I finally came back to my body, Kier was right there with me, just as stunned and sated as I was.

My hand moves faster as I try to recreate that feeling, and while I manage to pull my cum from my balls, my orgasm is more like a balloon springing a leak than popping with a bang. Accomplished, but not overly satisfying.

Using one of the many new washcloths I purchased to keep up with my sordid evening activity, I clean up as best I can without showering. Cam and Jagger will do that next, and if I'm lucky they'll clean up without going another round so I can get some decent sleep. Or as close to decent as I can when I'm sleeping alone.

"I thought I might find you here." Kier lets himself into the computer lab and hoists an uncharacteristically large bag onto

his workstation. “You’re supposed to be taking a few days off.”

“So are you.”

“Yeah, but I’m the boss so I’m allowed to break my own rule.” He starts removing a bunch of Tupperware and a bottle of wine from the bag.

“What is this?” I get from my desk and make my way to his, anticipation mounting as I take in the spread he’s putting out.

“Thanksgiving.”

“You brought me Thanksgiving dinner?”

“I brought *us* dinner. Just because we can’t be together yet doesn’t mean we have to be alone.”

Swoon! Who knew Kier Caldwell could be so romantic?

Well, he did follow me across the country in a manner of speaking, but I suspect that was an easier feat than cooking given the takeout menus I know he keeps in his desk drawer.

“Did you make all this?” I ask.

“Sort of. It’s one of those meal kits so I only had to mix together what was provided in the box.” He blushes, showing me a side of himself I’d yet to see. Average.

It’s pretty adorable.

And also, pretty impressive. “How much food did you make?”

“Enough to have some leftovers. And I wasn’t sure what you liked so I ordered some of everything. Ham and turkey, sweet and mashed potatoes, stuffing. And pie of course. Pumpkin and pecan, but those I got at the bakery. I know my limits.”

The ham and turkey are already sliced, so I assume they came that way and he only had to heat them up. The potatoes look homemade, as does the stuffing, so it’s clear a fair amount of effort went into preparing this, and that makes me smile like a giddy schoolgirl.

When all the food has been unpacked Kier uncorks the wine and pours us each a glass, holding his up as he speaks.

“I always thought it was silly when my parents made us say what we’re thankful for since they’re Irish, but I get it now. You don’t have to be American to reflect on the things you’re thankful for, but you do sometimes need a reminder like Thanksgiving since life can get so busy. And for us, having all these restrictions can make it hard to be thankful at all. But I am, because we found each other again, and even though the wait is maddening, in the end it will be worth it.”

I have never been a crier, but this man makes me feel *so much*, it’s hard not to tear up.

“We’re here now because *you* listened to your gut. *You* took the risk on a new job, a new state, and me, even after you learned I left some things out the first time we met. So, I’m thankful that you’re decisive, persistent, and above all, forgiving. And—” my gaze catches on his soft lips “—so help me if you don’t put that glass to your mouth right this instant, I’m going to cover it with mine, so...drink.”

Kier chuckles as the two of us hastily sip our wine, then dishes us each a plate, which we eat shoulder-to-shoulder sitting on the tile floor.

“Did your parents celebrate Thanksgiving because you were born here or because it’s a national holiday?” I take a bite of mashed potatoes.

“Both, I think. They made it a point to teach me about their history, so I’d have that knowledge, but they also tried to make sure I knew my own.

“You never mentioned why you decided to stay here. Why aren’t you spending the holiday with them?” I try the stuffing next.

He washes down a bite with his wine. “They’re actually visiting family back in Ireland.”

“Is it hard for your dad to travel without his leg?”

Kier gets a wistful look on his face as he traps his lips between his teeth. “Yes and no. He can walk just fine using the

prosthetic but going long distances or moving quickly are hard. Airports usually have scooters and things to help with that, so it's manageable. The plane is another story. He has to have an aisle because the prosthetic doesn't fit well in tight spaces, and getting up and down is hard because he has limited leverage, so it's like doing a one-legged squat. Fortunately, he's in decent shape, so he can maneuver better than most, but it's still not easy."

"Do you think you'd have gone into this field if he hadn't lost his leg." I chew thoughtfully as he once again takes his time answering.

"Remember how I told you once that the Matrix was life-changing."

The memory brings a genuine smile to my lips. "I do."

"Well, that movie is why I decided I wanted to work with computers. Some type of coding or something. I might have gone in a more artistic direction like virtual reality."

"How very shallow of you, using your gifts to make entertainment." I nudge his shoulder to assure him I'm teasing.

"I'll have you know they're using virtual reality to mimic surgery as a way to train surgeons." He smiles around a sip of wine.

"Touche." I smirk right back.

"You really had altruistic intentions from the start?" Kier arches a suspicious brow.

"Luke Skywalker's bionic arm may or may not have played a role in my decision. And if you ever tell Bennet I said that I'll... well I'm already withholding sex, so I'll have to come up with another consequence, but it'll be terrifying."

"Why can't Bennet know the truth?"

I squeeze my eyes shut so I don't have to watch how amused my answer makes him. "Because I always complain about having to make sci-fi references to explain what I'm doing, and if he knew how much sci-fi influenced my decision to study computers, I'd never hear the end of it."

Kier closes his eyes as his head falls against the wall behind us, letting out a full belly laugh. He sounds so carefree. So happy. And despite the fact we've been sitting next to each other the whole time, I'm pretty sure that's why my body chooses this moment to register the proximity of his hand to mine.

I'd barely have to move to touch him.

My body goes rigid with a restless tension, desperate to close the distance between our fingers yet knowing the slightest movement could push him further away. Like me, he knows if we give in to the smallest temptation it could spiral, so it's not worth the risk.

But we're so close, and it's been so long since we touched. Nearly a month, and even then, it was so brief. Just a little reassuring squeeze of my hand.

I want more.

The current flowing between us is so strong it feels like my hand is being pulled toward his, like the tractor beam pulling the Millennium Falcon to the Death Star, but without the ominous undertones. I've already gone Star Wars nerd on him once today, so I won't do it again, but damn... I feel a compulsion to let my fingers go where they're beckoned.

Either Kier doesn't feel the same, or he's just as unwilling as I am to ruin the moment by moving since his hand stays utterly still, but since the room is now eerily quiet, I'm guessing it's the former.

My body vibrates with the need to touch him. Even though it's wrong, even though it's pushing the limits of our restraint, I *need* to feel his skin on mine. Just for a moment.

I let my pinky creep closer, testing to see what Kier does. He takes a measured breath but is otherwise still, so I do it again. And again, the current intensifies with each millimeter I eliminate.

Then I feel it. So slight I could almost be convinced I imagined it, but a subtle curling of my knuckle confirms that Kier's pinky is kissing mine. Barely, but it's there.

That faint touch brings me such relief, it's like blood can flow freely through my body again, delivering much needed oxygen to my lungs. Tingles pulse from that tiny little point of contact, stretching into my chest and throughout my limbs, infusing me with such joy I feel weightless. But my breath gets caught once more when I feel Kier's finger draw a delicate line along mine.

Glancing at him from the corner of my eye, I note that his eyes are squeezed shut, preventing me from reading the effect my touch has on him. But the way his chest steadily rises and falls, too steadily to be anything but forced, tells me he's caught in the same spell I am.

Only our pinkies are touching, but that's enough to have my entire body on fire, my cock swelling with anticipation. I should stop this before it inflates past the point of no return, but I've been craving Kier's sensual touch for so long I can't give it up now. Even if it will only pain me later.

"Leanbh," he groans softly beside me.

"Just a little longer?" I plead.

He doesn't answer, but he doesn't move either. Not until the sky outside goes from light to dark, and the wine is gone.

Chapter Fifteen

Kier

DECEMBER

My phone dings in my pocket, and even though I don't want to check it, I do, knowing a non-response will only result in another text.

"Professor Kincaid again?" Aiden asks from his deck across the room.

"Yes." I sigh as I type out my response.

"What's he want this time?"

Over the past several months Daniel has been reaching out with increasing frequency, mostly about things that could be classified as work like sharing a news article or department gossip, but mixed in with that are sporadic inquiries about grabbing a meal or a drink after work. Since Aiden and I spend so much time in the lab together, he's become familiar with how often Daniel reaches out.

"There's a lecture about using AI to improve energy efficiency he thought I might want to hear."

"You could probably give that lecture, why would you need to hear it?"

"I couldn't give that lecture, it's not my specialty."

"You know what I mean," Aiden says pointedly.

“Yes,” I agree, since I know his response has nothing to do with the lecture and everything to do with the fact we can’t ask each other to do things like this, which we’d both enjoy. I think it’s starting to grate on him that Daniel can suggest public outings he can’t.

“I’m starting to think he has a crush on you,” Aiden says, and while I’ve wondered that myself, Daniel hasn’t said or done anything to definitively answer that question, so I dismiss the comment.

“You’re the one he thinks is cute.” I wink at him when he gasps.

“Eew, I was his student. His *literal* student, not a TA he met outside school grounds.” He throws in the disclaimer that we’re different, never missing an opportunity to remind me of his willingness to blur the lines a little when it comes to our *no dating until after graduation* policy.

“I’m just telling you what he told me.”

“Again, ew. I don’t think I’ll be able to look at him the same way again.” He wrinkles his nose.

“How did you look at him before?”

Aiden cocks his head to the side and gnaws on his lip. “I didn’t really. I mean, obviously I saw him as a professor, but outside class he’s just... I didn’t have any thoughts about him. Maybe that’d be different if his classes challenged me, but they were 101 level classes I had to take, and I found them pretty basic, so I didn’t give them, or him, much thought. Is that awful?”

“No, just honest.”

“What about you? What do you think of him?”

The question surprises me since I’m not one of his students, and I feel my brows pull together as I ask, “Why would I think of him?”

“Because he’s into you.”

“I’m not into him.”

“I know, but if he does like you, you can’t just ignore it.”

“Why not?”

Aiden chews on his lip again.

“It bothers you that I’d ignore it?” I press gently.

“I don’t like it, no. I don’t like him having a crush on you either, but ignoring it could hurt him.”

“How do I even know he’s interested; he’s never said anything.”

Aiden lifts a listless shoulder. “That doesn’t mean the feelings don’t exist.”

Since his comments don’t appear to be coming from jealousy, I have a feeling they’re rooted in something more personal. “Is this a you and Bennet thing or me and Daniel thing?”

His teeth work that lip again, something he knows he can bait me with, although I think in this instance it’s a subconscious act.

“A little of both?” he says. “I’ve been in that spot before, and while I bear responsibility for Bennet being oblivious to my feelings, part of me thinks if he was paying attention he would’ve caught on. And even though it would’ve hurt, I think I’d have appreciated him telling me he wasn’t interested since that would’ve at least been confirmation that he saw me. Like... at least I was important enough to notice, even if he didn’t reciprocate.”

My heart breaks for what Aiden went through, even though I’m selfishly elated his roommate was blind to those feelings. Still, it’s clear the experience left a mark on him, and I think it’s sweet he doesn’t want another man to go through the same thing.

He’s as beautiful inside as he is out.

I’m still not sure he’s right about the crush though.

“I hear what you’re saying, but ninety percent of what Daniel texts me about could be considered work, and the other ten percent could be blowing off steam *about* work since I’m a colleague. What if I have a conversation like the one you’re suggesting, and I offend him because he doesn’t see me that way.”

“Okay, A—everyone sees you that way. Trust me on this.” The flare of heat in his eyes is brief yet undeniable, and he swallows thickly before he continues. “And B, no one said you have to come right out and say *I know you like me, but I don’t feel the same way.*”

I throw my hands up. “You literally just told me you wished Bennet had done that.”

“Bennet and I had been best friends for years by that point, so that would’ve worked for us. For you, all you need to do is avoid leading him on.”

“How do I do that?” I grumble.

“Tell him you’ve got a boyfriend.”

“And when he wants to meet that boyfriend? What do I say then?”

“Tell him he’s on the east coast. Or back in Ireland. As long as he knows you’re off limits that’s all that matters.”

Though Aiden’s obviously concerned about Daniel’s feelings, his use of the term *off-limits* sets off warning bells.

“Is this strictly about making sure I’m not leading anyone on, or are you worried someone might think I’m available?”

“Both,” he says to the floor, caramel eyes partially hidden by the blond hair that’s getting just a bit too long, though it doesn’t detract from his beauty.

“Where’s this coming from, Leanbh? You know I’m spoken for.”

He shrugs a shoulder without looking up. “Sometimes I wonder why you’d put yourself through all these rules and secrecy when you could be with someone else out in the open.”

“I could say the same thing about you.”

“No one else compares to you.” Aiden’s cheeks are pink when he finally lifts his face.

“That’s exactly how I feel. Other people aren’t you.”

He smiles, though it doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

I think I know how to fix that.

“Would you like to go to the lecture?”

Aiden gasps, eyes flashing with excitement just before they seem to dim. “We can’t.”

“We can’t go as boyfriends, but we can go as colleagues. And if Daniel’s there too no one would think twice. What do you say? Come to the lecture with me?”

I feel like the luckiest man on the planet when he says, “Okay.”

“I would’ve expected you two to be sick of each other after all the time you spend in the lab,” Daniel says when Aiden and I meet him for the lecture two days later. Though he’s smiling brightly, I hear a bite to his words that I’m not sure is real or imagined

All the talk about crushes might be coloring my perception.

“Half the time we’re so busy working we don’t even talk, so it almost feels like you’re by yourself,” Aiden says expertly.

Even though that’s a bit of a white lie, he delivers it so smoothly I once again find myself in awe of his poise.

“It’s also hard to talk when your assistant has his earbuds in.” I do my part. “I have to text him to get his attention since he can’t hear when I say his name.”

“You don’t still find music distracting when you’re analyzing data?” Daniel looks at Aiden skeptically.

Still?

“Oh, I do,” Aiden says. “But my earbuds have a noise canceling feature I use to block out anything that might be distracting.”

Well, that embellishment nearly backfired. Maybe I should leave the storytelling to Aiden.

I stuff my hands in my pockets and walk a step behind the two of them as we head for the entrance.

“So, what you’re saying is you find this guy distracting.” Daniel points his thumb in my direction.

“Not at all. I tend to block things out preemptively so it’s easier to concentrate. It has nothing to do with Kier.”

“Kier?” Daniel glances at me over his shoulder, arching a suspicious brow. “Your assistant calls you Kier?”

Good thing my hands are in my pockets so he can’t see how white my knuckles are.

“Why wouldn’t he? I’m more like a colleague since Aiden’s never been my student, and colleagues tend to use first names.”

Aiden mouths *sorry* while Daniel’s still looking at me, and I dip my head just slightly as Daniel mumbles *hmm*.

Why did I invite my secret love interest to spend time with me and a colleague who may or may not have a crush on me? I'm supposed to be a genius, right?

“So, Professor.” Aiden turns to Daniel. “How are your classes this semester?”

Daniel tells us about the courses he's teaching, taking the heat off Aiden and I for what we call each other and how much time we spend together, and from there the conversation naturally centers around our work.

“Are you planning to include a unit on AI in your classes? Is that what made you interested in this lecture?” Aiden asks as we take our seats, with me positioned between the two men.

“Oh no,” Daniel says. “My curriculum is full without a unit on AI. I just thought Kier might find it interesting.”

“Of course.” Aiden nods along as though that makes perfect sense, but the slight flush in his cheeks has me thinking he's not buying that.

Aiden leans back and wriggles in his seat, getting situated, and while he's busy Daniel leans closer to ask for my opinion on a new coding program he's thinking about introducing to his students. Before I can answer, my phone beeps with a text notification.

I give Daniel an apologetic look and fish it from my pocket, nearly dropping the damn thing when I see a text from Leanbh.

Have fun tonight. XOXO. And don't forget to silence your phone.

“Is that Conor?” Aiden asks with such innocence I'm momentarily speechless. *Conor?*

“Who's Conor?” Daniel asks from my other side.

“His boyfriend,” Aiden replies.

“Boyfriend?” There's no mistaking the shock in Daniel's voice. “You've never said anything about a boyfriend before.”

“I...” I clear my throat to stall for time. “I don't usually talk about my personal life.”

“But your assistant knows.” That tiny hint of a bite is back in Daniel’s tone.

“Only because Conor’s called before when we were in the lab. Kier was busy and asked me to check who was calling in case it could wait, and when the name read Leanbh he had to explain.”

“Leanbh?” Daniel asks.

“It’s Irish for baby. isn’t that cute?” Aiden gushes. *He’s way too good at subterfuge.*

“Very,” Daniel says flatly. “So, did you meet Conor here? Why haven’t we seen him?”

“We met in Boston. He’s still there.” *Please, God don’t ask me anything else.*

“Oof, long distance.” Daniels tsks. “That’s tough. Why are there no pictures of your baby in your office?”

“Conor isn’t... He isn’t, uh... out,” I stutter.

Daniels eyes flare wide. “He’s not? Why would you date someone in the closet?”

At a loss for a better explanation, I simply shrug my shoulders and mumble, “I like him.”

Fortunately, the lecture starts after that, so there’s no more grilling me about my secret boyfriend—the one named Conor. And the presentation itself is very well done, offering some insight into how AI can manage the flow of power through the grid, which is something Aiden and I might want to look into for our work so that prosthetics can regulate the force to walk versus run.

I take the presenter’s card afterward so I can reach out to him with any questions, and maybe even to gauge his interest in a new company.

I still haven’t mentioned it to Aiden—I don’t want to get his hopes up—but I’ve reconnected with the man who wanted me to start a new venture with him several years ago, and we’re chatting about what that might look like now. Though I have a few stipulations regarding the mission and the work, the primary one is that Aiden be included, which I’ll bring up when the time is right.

As we exit the venue both Aiden and I thank a somewhat glum Daniel for a nice evening, and when Aiden mentions the need to

order an Uber, I offer to take him home, so he doesn't have to wait. But really, we need to talk.

"I can't believe you texted me while I was sitting right next to Daniel," I admonish when we get in the car.

"Well, he'd basically just confirmed he wanted the night to be a date, and you weren't saying anything. What else was I supposed to do? Besides, it's not like my name came up on the screen."

"That was still an unnecessary risk."

"Calculated," he objects. "And it worked. Now he knows you aren't available so he can move on, although you still might want to talk to him."

"And say what?" I balk as I pull out of the parking lot.

"That once you arrived you got the impression he meant the evening to be a date, which you weren't aware of, and if that's the case you apologize for the confusion."

"That's—" I change course once his words register"—actually sort of perfect."

"Yeah, well, I told you I had some experience with this. It won't make him feel good exactly, but hopefully it'll make him feel better. Eventually."

"He did seem a little glum when you mentioned Conor. Thanks for the heads up on my boyfriend's name by the way," I quip sarcastically. "I hope I can remember it."

"Just substitute Leanbh if you get stuck." I see him smirking from the corner of my eye.

"You are so lucky I never changed it to your name."

"That wasn't luck. I knew it didn't say Aiden."

"How?"

"Because I've always been Leanbh to you."

Chapter Sixteen

Aiden

“A iden Sinclair it is the day after Christmas, you can’t possibly be serious about going back to school.” My mother stands in the doorway of my room as I pack, almost as if she intends to block the exit.

“I have so much to do, I’ll be behind if I don’t leave today.”

“Behind on what? Classes don’t start until January.”

“I still have all my research work.” I stuff my folded sweatshirts into my suitcase, smooshing them down so there’s room for my jeans.

“That professor you work for is forcing you to give up time with your family to be his free labor?”

“He isn’t making me come back from break early, I’m choosing to. I want to finish this project before graduation because it’ll be a big deal to have it on my applications going forward.”

“Applications for what? School or work?” My mom puts her hands on her hips, a telltale sign she’s losing patience.

I’ve gone over my future options with my parents, and the fact I’m wavering on what to do concerns them since that’s out of character. I told them I’m exploring both options because while I want to do grad school, it’s possible any company I go

to work for would foot the bill for that, in which case it'd be silly to pay out of pocket.

Too bad they know my grades would most likely make me eligible for significant scholarship money, rendering the whole work versus school argument moot, if the extra degree is what I want.

“Both. The stuff I’m working on is cutting edge. It’s like a golden ticket, if I can finish.”

Just then Conor, my brother-in-law, comes to check on things, and my mom throws her hands in the air with a little *you talk to him* gesture and stomps away.

“You’re really gonna leave early and make me deal with her moping by myself, A?” he asks.

“What about your wife?”

“Another female.”

“My dad?”

The two of us catch each other’s eye and crack up laughing. Dad is the only person in the house who can get away with ignoring my mom, which he does regularly since she likes to talk. God love her, but it’s hard to get a word in around the woman. You’re expected to listen intently, unless you’re my dad.

“Seriously, what’s the rush? And don’t tell me it’s work. You can’t bullshit a bullshitter. It’s a guy, isn’t it?” he asks as he reclines against the headboard and kicks his feet on the bed.

This is why I love Conor. There’s no drama. No judgment. Just support.

“Yeah, it’s a guy.”

“She’d probably understand that you know.” When I pack my pants instead of responding, he groans, “What aren’t you saying?”

“You can’t tell anyone.”

Conor rolls his eyes. “You’re not twelve anymore, A.”

“I know. But this is... In a few months it won’t be a big deal, but right now it is.”

“Right now it’s...” Conor’s face turns serious. “Tell me you’re not sleeping with your professor.”

“He’s not my professor.”

“*Aiden.*”

“He’s not. He’s my boss. Or mentor? You could make an argument for both I guess.”

Conor’s head thunks against the wall.

“And technically,” I continue, “he wasn’t *either* the first time we... The only time we... you know.”

“Let me get this straight.” Conor sighs. “You hooked up with a guy you didn’t know only to find out later he’s your new boss?”

“Technically, I did know him, although he didn’t know me. But yes, at that time neither of us knew I’d end up working for him.”

“Back up.” Conor shakes his head like that’ll somehow make the pieces fall into place. “How do you know someone that doesn’t know you?”

“He’s kind of famous. In certain circles.”

“Okay, I see how this goes. You get picked up by the celebrity and then have the misfortune of getting stuck working for him.”

“Technically, I did the picking up.”

Conor groans. “Are you or are you not *technically* dating someone you’re not supposed to?”

“Actually, no. We won’t date until I graduate. He’s been very clear on that.”

“At least someone’s thinking with the head on their shoulders,” Conor mumbles.

“Hey, that’s—” my brother-in-law shoots me a wry look, so I finish that objection with “—fair.”

My brother-in-law shoots me a sly look before he abruptly stills. “How old is this guy? We’re not talking about gray hair, are we?”

“No! Of course not.”

“Well, he is a professor. Older or younger than me?”

“Younger. He’s thirty-two.”

“That’s only three years younger than me.” Conor winces like that’s too close for comfort.

“And only ten years older than me, so it’s really not that crazy. It’s not like he could be my dad or anything.”

“That’s a thought I didn’t need in my head.” A shiver wracks through his body. “Tell me how can you be sure this guy will wait around until you graduate? No offense, but ten years is still kind of a big deal, and dating a student at the school you work for, even if you aren’t his student, sounds like professional suicide.”

I wet my lips nervously. “After that first night, he tried looking for me. And when he didn’t find me, he took a job at the university because he hoped being in Colorado would make the search easier, since we met in Denver.”

Conor’s eyebrows shoot to the sky. “No bullshit?”

“No bullshit.”

“Okay.” He doesn’t sound totally convinced, but he doesn’t try to tell me I’m wrong either. “Tell me about him.”

“He’s Irish. Or at least his adoptive parents are, and he’s not a bloody bohemian. I checked.” Conor smiles proudly, so I continue. “The Matrix made him want to study computers, but he likes M. Night Shyamalan and the Coen brothers.”

“The dude abides,” Conor recites.

“That’s what I said. He likes IPAs instead of Guinness, he cooked me Thanksgiving dinner—it was a meal kit—but still. He’s merging AI with prosthetics to help his dad get back to running after he lost his leg in a car accident, and he forgave me for pretending I didn’t know who he was when we met.

Ooh, he also watched *Into the Spider Verse* just because I like it. And he's gorgeous. Tall, dark, and handsome, gorgeous."

"Damn, A. I was expecting you to tell me superficial shit like his favorite food or favorite color, but you went straight to the deep stuff."

It hadn't occurred to me until just now that I don't know the superficial stuff. I'd rather know the deep things, but the rest would be good to know too.

"This is the real deal then?" Conor asks.

I nod solemnly.

"When do we meet him?"

Whoa, that's not at all what I was expecting.

"You aren't going to say it's too fast or too reckless?" I brace for his answer since Conor always tells me the truth. It's a rule we have.

"It can be both those things and still be real. I don't know if you remember when I first started dating your sister, but we didn't take the long route. We moved in together within the first three months—which really pissed your folks off by the way—and were married about a year after. But she and I knew from the start what we had, so what seemed fast and reckless to everyone else seemed right to us."

"That's exactly how I feel about Kier."

"Strong Irish name," Conor says. "I like it."

"You'll like him, too. When you meet him at graduation." I stuff my socks and underwear in the suitcase and seal it up. "Drive me to the bus station?"

Conor shakes his head. "You know your mom is expecting me to talk you out of leaving, and now you're making me complicit in your escape. This is gonna cost you big time."

"Name your price."

"Tea party."

"What?"

“You heard me. Take your niece out for a tea party when we come for graduation. It’s all she wants to do, and if I have to eat any more of those tiny sandwiches that taste like air it just might kill me, swear to God.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll take her out for tea.”

“Good.” Conor beams like he’s just closed a major deal, but before he gets off the bed, he turns serious. “Promise me you’ll be careful, A. Even if this guy isn’t your teacher, it sounds like you both think this thing could be frowned upon if you’re hiding it. Just don’t do anything to jeopardize your future.”

“I won’t.”

I keep my promise for as long as it takes to get back to campus, but the moment I’m unpacked I head to the lab.

That in and of itself isn’t a big deal, but the fact that I’m bearing gifts could be seen as crossing the line.

Good thing no one else is around.

“What’s this?” Keir looks at me incredulously when I hand him an oversized package.

“You understand the concept of unwrapping things to answer that question, right?” I snark right back.

“Brat,” he mutters as he tears into the paper, looking a little pale as he takes in his gift. “A sled?”

“I figure you might need to work up to a snowboard, and this way you can get a taste of the mountain without worrying about your arms and legs going a million different directions.”

“That can happen on a sled, too. I’ve seen it.” Kier eyes the sled with apprehension.

“Only if you go over a jump, and we’ll be sure to stay away from those.”

“We? You’re planning to do this with me?”

“Of course.”

He worries his lip. “That makes it sound a little more tolerable. What about the heated jacket? I need one of those too.”

“Well, aside from the fact I’d need a raise to afford one of those, you really don’t need it outside the mountains. You’ll work up a pretty good sweat walking up the hill. I can give you hand warmers for your gloves though.”

He gives me a withering look. “You’re lucky you’re so cute, otherwise I’d never consider this.”

I wet my lip suggestively. “I know.”

Kier stares at my mouth for a beat before forcibly looking away. “I got you something too.” He hands me a small, heavy gift bag, and I gasp when I pull out a bottle of Knappogue Castle.

“You remembered?” I gape at him.

“I remember everything about that night, Leanbh. Everything.”

I’m so close to kissing him I have to fist my hand to the point my blunt nails leave a visible indent. *How will I make it to graduation without touching him?*

“Drink?” My voice is scratchy when I finally find it.

“I’m not sure we should,” he hedges.

“Just one. I have a few questions I want to ask you.”

Kier regards me warily. “Okay.”

We sink to the floor, which has become an uncomfortable yet normal position for us to talk. I open the bottle and take a sip of the honied liquid before passing it to Kier. “I realized there are some very basic things I don’t know about you, so I think we should have a little Q and A. A speed round where you say the first thing that comes to mind.”

Kier takes his own sip then wipes the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, shaking off the bite of the liquor. “Okay,” he rasps.

“I’ll start. Favorite color,” I begin.

“Green. Yours?”

“Blue. Favorite food.”

“Hamburgers.”

“Really?” I wrinkle my nose. “I figured you’d say something Irish like stew.”

“Stew was a staple. Hamburgers were for special occasions,” he rationalizes.

“Makes sense.”

“What about you? What’s your favorite?”

He passes the bottle back to me and I take a sip. “Steak.”

“Oh, you’re the expensive date guy?” He smiles coyly.

“I’d never turn down a good burger, but like you said, you like the things that were for special occasions. For us that was steak. Next question. Chocolate, vanilla or strawberry?”

“Vanilla.”

“Same.” I use the word we’ve barely spoken since that first night, which does not go unnoticed if the flare of heat in Kier’s eyes is any indication. “Favorite place you’ve traveled?”

“Switzerland.”

I wrinkle my nose again. “The guy who doesn’t love the mountains went to the Alps?”

“Not the Alps. CERN. I saw the Hadron Collider.”

“Okay, favorite non-work-related travel.” I pass him the bottle.

“Same answer. And I never said I don’t like the mountains; I don’t like the cold. Mountains are incredible. What about you?” Kier takes another sip of whiskey.

“Belize. But only the jungle part. They have these ancient caves that words just can’t describe.”

“Belize?” Kier’s head tilts to the side. “I’ve never heard of anyone going to Belize before.”

“It’s a Denver thing, I think, since it’s a direct four-hour flight to the second largest reef in the world.”

“Huh,” Kier marvels. “Where’s someplace you’d like to go?”

“Japan.”

“Really? How come?”

“They’re doing some really interesting things with robotics. They have great snowboarding. There’s almost zero crime, midday naps are encouraged, you can get square watermelons, and they have a penis festival.”

Kier coughs up the whiskey he’d been trying to swallow. “A what?”

“It’s technically a celebration of fertility, but it’s all about the penis. There are penis hats, penis shaped candy, people literally worship the penis.”

“Do they... Let them out?” Kier almost whispers that last part.

“I don’t think so, but I wouldn’t object to a little eye candy. Would you?”

“I’m good with just yours.” He sputters and turns tomato red as soon as he realizes what he said, nervously glancing my way.

“You haven’t seen it in months.” I shift to relieve the sudden and intense pressure behind my zipper, the idea of showing one another the desire we feel after such prolonged distance all-consuming.

“Leanbh,” he groans. “Move on to another topic.”

“I like this one.” I stand my ground, knowing it’s ill-advised but feeling too touch-starved and horny to care. Besides, campus is empty, the building is deserted...why shouldn’t we allow ourselves this one moment of happiness during what’s supposed to be the happiest time of year?

“You’re playing a dangerous game here,” Kier warns.

“I know.” I shift again.

My cock plumps on the regular around Kier—how could it not—but it usually doesn't amount to more than a semi since we're so cautious to avoid saying or doing anything that might be considered temptation. Aside from a few heated looks, and the occasional brush of our fingers, we've been exceptionally good for months. Borderline saints. And I'm over it.

Sorry Conor.

"Take your dick out." I tell Kier.

"What?" He caps the whiskey and sets it aside, no doubt blaming it for my loose lips. He might have a small point, but it's more carnal need than lowered inhibitions that have me requesting he release his cock.

"You heard me. I won't touch it. I just want to see it." I lick my lip, more in anticipation than to deliberately bait him, yet knowing full well what that gesture will do to him.

"That's... I really shouldn't." Kier's hand twitches over his lap, but he's otherwise as still as a statue.

"Isn't it uncomfortable trapped inside your pants? Mine is." My hips seem to strain upward though I'm doing my damndest to stay still.

Eyes glued to my crotch, he whispers, "Show me."

Figuring I have about two seconds before he changes his mind, I race to undo my pants, shoving them to the top of my thighs so my dick is free of all restrictions.

Kier sighs as his eyes flutter shut. "So beautiful."

I look at my dick, standing proud between my legs. It's as hard as it's ever been, slightly pink at the tip, lurching sporadically in search of friction.

"Now you." My voice is so hoarse I barely recognize it, but Kier hears the lust, and rushes to do as I instruct.

Pants shoved down, his dick sprouts upward from a tuft of dark hair, standing as tall as mine. My fingers ache to hold it, to close it in my fist and stroke, savoring the smooth skin wrapped around his taut shaft. But I promised I wouldn't, so I

grab mine instead, crying out in relief the instant my nerves get the friction they want.

“Leanbh,” Kier groans beside me, fisting his own cock in a grip that covers all but his swollen crown.

“Oh, God.” I sigh as I flex my hand around my length. “I remember how it felt when you held me. Gentle at first, pumping long and slow.” My hand moves in time with my words, crawling leisurely up and down my cock. “Almost like you were committing me to memory.”

“I was,” Kier grits beside me.

“Your hand felt so good. Soft but tight. Squeezing me to see what sort of pressure I like.”

Once again, the motion of my hand mimics my words. Mirroring me, Kier works his own length, groaning with unrestrained need.

The sound takes me back to that first night, when all inhibitions were ignored and we were free to indulge in each other fully. What I wouldn't give to have that again right now. To feel his need. Taste his arousal.

Watching isn't the same, but given the circumstances, it'll have to do. And I suppose it's not completely futile. There's an intimacy to it that's surprisingly potent. Touching yourself under the watchful eye of another requires almost as much trust as giving them free reign over your body, with a slight element of the taboo. It's shockingly arousing.

“Fuck this is hot. You like it?” I ask.

He grunts affirmatively.

“Show me.”

Kier swipes the finger of his free hand over his slit and holds the glistening digit up for my inspection. Instinct takes over and I open my mouth so he can wipe the drop over my tongue, shuddering when I close my lips around his finger and gently suck.

His taste is faint, but I recognize it instantly. So does my body, my cock jolting inside my fist.

“Leanbh,” he whispers my name with desperation and takes his finger away.

“God, I wish I could taste all of you right now.” I tug my aching shaft.

“We can’t. Even this...” he pants as he strokes himself. “Even this is going too far.”

“I still haven’t touched you,” I justify as my hips try to chase my fist, mimicking how I’d like to move inside him.

“We can’t do it again. Not while—”

“I know.”

“Play with your balls,” Kier begs. “Play with them and let me see all of your cock.”

Though it physically pains me to move my hand, I do, reaching between my legs to fondle my sac so Kier can have an unobstructed view of my dick. He does the same, letting me see how swollen and red he is.

I suspect this is a delay tactic, a way to prolong this one moment of weakness since we don’t know when we’ll get another, but despite the ache in my groin, I have no objections. I don’t want this to end too soon either, so I’ll gladly deny my release if it means more time with him, like this.

We both rut into the air while groping our nuts, frantically straining for something to relieve the throbbing in our dicks. It’s the dirtiest, most carnal thing I’ve ever seen or participated in, yet it’s also one of the most beautiful. A symbol of our lust, the yearning we feel for one another. I fucking *love* it.

The effect we have on each other is nothing short of euphoric. A physical and emotional connection that breathes life into my soul and makes my body vibrate with desire.

If I feel this way now, will I even survive it when we can finally touch?

My cock begs for friction—my hand, Kier’s dick, his mouth—anything that might calm the growing flame of desire.

“Kier,” I groan as the pressure mounts. “I need to fuck my fist.”

“Do it,” he rasps, wrapping his left hand around his cock while his right searches for mine. I take it, muffling a relieved cry as I link our fingers together for the first time in months. Then my free hand reaches for my swollen length.

The sigh I emit when I grab my shaft is downright hedonistic, matched in carnality only by Kier’s own ragged groan. That sigh quickly turns to a whimper as I watch his hand shuttling furiously over his dick, pumping with such urgency there’s no doubt in my mind his release is imminent.

I increase my own pace in a frenzied attempt to keep up, to come at the same time he does so that we’re bonded not just in our lust but our nirvana. Whether it’s the pace of my fist or the sight of his cum spurting from his tip I can’t say, but the moment he explodes I do too, coating my hand in months of pent-up agony.

Bodies twitching, we both moan as the aftershocks ripple through us, linked fingers turning white from the strain of holding each other the only way we can. It feels both tragic and beautiful.

Slumped against the wall, legs splayed wide as our sticky cocks go soft against our thighs, Kier and I are both too boneless to move for what feels like an eternity. I’m vaguely aware of the hand holding his going numb, though I make no attempt to move it. I’d rather suffer the pins and needles than let go.

When Kier finally comes back to his body, it’s with an obvious start. “Leanbh. Shit.” He gets up and grabs us each some paper towels to clean up. “I can’t believe we... That can’t...”

“I know.” I wipe away the evidence covering my body. “But don’t expect me to regret that, because I don’t.”

“I don’t either,” he whispers softly, his blue eyes full of an emotion both of us have been careful not to name.

Mustering strength I don't feel I try to act normal. "See you tomorrow?"

"Actually, no. I have some meetings out-of-town over the next few days." He doesn't elaborate further, leaving me no choice but to pretend I'm not dying to know details.

"We're supposed to get snow the thirty-first." I stand and tuck myself away. "Want to try out your new sled?"

"Is that safe?"

"I know some out-of-the-way spots. Meet here first?" I hand Kier the paper towels so he can throw them away.

"Yeah." He puts my bottle back in the gift bag and hands it to me, fingertips deliberately brushing against mine. "Merry Christmas, Leanbh."

"Merry Christmas Kier."

We stare at each other's mouths for a beat, fighting the urge to say goodbye with our lips the way we really want. Then we leave the lab one at a time.

Chapter Seventeen

Kier

This is a bad idea. Putting aside the fact that I'm not a fan of the cold, seeing Aiden outside school grounds is a dangerous proposition.

Hell, seeing him at all is dangerous considering what happened a few days ago, which miraculously hasn't happened since, but that can hardly be blamed on our restraint since we haven't been in the same room again.

God, I'm still reeling from that. Not just how unbelievably sexy that encounter was, but how unbelievably stupid. Logically, I know the date had a lot to do with it—there wasn't a single soul in the building the day after Christmas—but crossing that bridge even once makes it all the more likely we'll do it again before Aiden has his degree in hand.

I turn up the heater in the car as I wait for him to arrive, hoping he remembers to bring me those hand warmer things, and sort of dreading how close he'll be once he gets in the car.

My restraint is waning. Every day it gets harder not to touch him, but I've held firm, never allowing myself to have contact with anything beyond his hand, and even that I've staunchly avoided. If I'm being literal, I'm still mostly in compliance with my no touching rule, but damn do I want to.

Having him so close while he was in the throes of ecstasy brought back all sorts of memories I'd been able to push aside so they didn't constantly tempt me, and now, not only are they back, but I've got new ones to go with them.

That beautiful cock, aching and swollen. Long fingers, white at the knuckles from the strength of his grip. Thighs trembling as he punched into his fist.

Dammit, if I'm not careful I'll end up sledding with a boner.

"Hi." Aiden throws the door open, a gust of cold air pushing away the heat as he sits in the passenger seat.

Despite the chill, my chest warms at the sight of him.

"Hi," I reply.

"Well, you're not a no-show. I guess that means no second thoughts?" He asks as he points me in the direction I'm supposed to go.

"I have plenty of those. Am I willingly going to sit in the cold? Is it wise for a thirty-two-year-old man to slide down a mountain? Should I even be driving right now?"

"The roads are clear." Aiden points to the white street, leading me to believe we have very different definitions of clear.

"I can't see the asphalt."

"Only because the snow is compacted. There's barely an inch on the street. You act like you've never driven in snow before." He points for me to take the next right.

"It's been a while," I mutter as I turn the car, hoping I don't slide out.

"This is good practice then."

I choose not to respond so I can concentrate, pulling up to a sparsely filled parking lot about ten minutes later. Since it's twilight on New Year's Eve, the bulk of the crowd has already dissipated, leaving us with a virtually wide open hill that we can take over for hours since there are lights overlooking it.

“Here.” Aiden hands me a pair of snow pants. “Put these on.”

“You do realize we’re the only people here without children.” I have to open the door just to have enough room to kick my legs out.

“Stop complaining.” He gets his own pants on then fusses with some sort of tiny white package that he hands to me. “And put one of these in each of your gloves.”

“Why would I—ooh, these are warm.”

“Told you.” He beams. “You’ll be nice and toasty. Come on.”

We grab the sled from the trunk, one of those long, skinny plastic things, and make our way to the top of the hill. Aiden sets it on the relatively flat ground at the top of the slope and kneels down to hold it in place. “Front or back?”

“We’re riding together?”

“Of course.”

“Will we even fit?” Neither of us is overly big, but we’re both hovering just shy of six feet with athletic builds, and the sled looks like it’s built for one.

“Just trust me. Front or back?”

“Back,” I say, reasoning that I might prefer to look at the back of Aiden’s head than whatever obstacle we’re probably going to hit.

Aiden sits toward the front of the sled and gestures for me to climb on behind. Once I’m situated, he drapes my legs over his so they’re more or less on the sled and instructs me to help him push us forward.

It takes a minute, but once we crest the top of the hill gravity takes over and we start to hurl downhill. I say hurl because together there’s a lot of weight on this sled, and nothing to keep us from falling.

Aiden wraps my arms around his torso, whether to keep me *inside* the moving object or give me something to hold onto

I'm not sure. Either way, I'm not loosening my grip.

The cold wind makes my eyes water, but once I get past the initial sensation of falling it feels like I'm flying. Sort of. I mean, obviously my ass is still on the ground, but at the same time I have the sense that I'm soaring. And by the time we get to the bottom of the hill, I realize I'm laughing.

That's one advantage of our age difference, he makes me feel like a kid again.

"Well?" Aiden asks as we glide to a stop.

I unlock my arms and flop backward so that my back is on the snow, my face pointing to the sky, feeling just as light as I did while we were barreling downhill. "I don't remember this being so fun as a kid."

"We probably got going a lot faster than you ever did."

"Yeah, maybe. I can't imagine going that fast standing up though."

"It takes a little getting used to, but once you get the hang of it there's nothing else like it."

"For the first time since you told me you willingly suffer near hypothermia to do this, I can almost see it. I still want the electric jacket though. And maybe a scarf so my nose doesn't get so cold."

"That can be arranged." Aiden laughs. "Come on, let's go again. You're in front this time."

We trudge back up the hill, a reminder of why I haven't done this for years since the climb is not as easy as it looks, and take several more runs before taking a break in the car to drink the hot chocolate Aiden brought in a thermos.

"How are your hands?" he asks.

"Not cold in the slightest. Those warmer things are genius."

"So, you don't need me to warm them up for you?" He blinks his lashes almost demurely, though it's not as innocent a gesture as he'd have me believe.

"Leanbh." I sigh. "Are you trying to cause trouble?"

“Guilty.” He traps his plump bottom lip with a tooth.

“The other day won’t hold you over for another few months?” I hold my breath, assuming I know the answer.

“I know it should,” Aiden says without any sign of flirting. “But no. It only made things worse.”

“Same,” I admit softly. “Quick, talk about something else before I forget all the reasons I’m not supposed to touch you.”

Aiden tries to smile—unsuccessfully—but he does manage to get us on another topic.

“How did your meetings go?”

“Really well.”

When I don’t elaborate, Aiden sighs. “The whole point of talking about something else is to *talk*.”

I roll my lips while I debate what to say, not because this is a secret—not from Aiden anyway—I just didn’t want to tell him about it until things were more concrete.

“I’ve been exploring a new career oppor—”

“What?” He just barely manages not to spit out a mouthful of hot chocolate. “You’re leaving?”

“Let me finish, Leanbh.” I reach for the hand not holding his thermos and hold it in mine. “Remember how I said I have several thoughts about our future job options, and I wasn’t sure which one would be the best.”

“Yes,” he says warily.

“Well, I keep thinking that our specialty is so niche we’ll have to work at the same company if we want to live in the same place, so our relationship will always be in conflict with our work. I’d end up being some sort of mentor or supervisor, which would not only be an HR nightmare for the company but might cause people to read into any of your career advancements. The only way we can work together without anyone questioning my motives is if we’re equals.”

“I know I’m breaking my own rule here, but I feel obligated to point out that we can never be equals when you’ve got a

decade of experience in a field I'm studying.”

“If we work for other people that's true, but if we work for ourselves, we can have the same title or rank or whatever you want to call it.”

Aiden's lips part slightly as he blinks his eyes, not a single line visible on his angelic face. It makes him look even younger, although that thought is secondary to how beautiful he is when he's shocked and flattered.

“You'd... But that's... I'm not qualified,” he sputters.

“Of course, you are. You're already collaborating with me as my equal.”

“I'm just doing the math,” he tries to object, but I shake my head firmly.

“You're hypothesizing, identifying variables, and testing the algorithms. Those are things I'd be teaching you how to do if you were just an assistant. Instead, you're doing them on your own and then sharing your findings. I'd be an egotistical jerk if I considered you anything other than a partner.” I squeeze his hand to reinforce my words.

“I... But... What we do requires tens of millions of dollars of equipment. More probably. We can't just—”

“We aren't. At least not yet. That's what my meeting was about.”

The tiniest crease appears between his brows. “I don't understand.”

“A few years ago, I met a guy who wanted me to start a medical research company with him. At the time it wasn't a good fit, so I declined, but when I was trying to solve our predicament, I thought he might be a good resource. We had dinner in Denver, and I told him what I was looking for. While he's not opposed to it, since he didn't pursue it after I turned him down it'd take some time to resurrect. Time we don't have if we need to have jobs or grad school locked down by the time you graduate.”

“I thought you said this meeting went well.” Aiden looks at me like I might be losing it.

“Still not finished,” I tell him wryly. “Anyhow, the meeting made me realize that while we might not have the materials we need for our own company, we have the knowledge, and that’s a commodity we can capitalize on right away. We can form our own consulting company and hire ourselves out to the businesses that will support our research. We’d use their facilities, and while they’d own the IP for the work, as a partner of theirs rather than an employee, we might be able to negotiate a percentage of ownership for the work we do. But the most important factor in all this is that they hire *our* company, the one we own together.”

“That’s...” Aiden trails off, staring at me in disbelief. “What value do I bring to this? Putting aside what you said about us collaborating, to the outside world I’m a nobody. Doesn’t my involvement make it harder for this company to be legitimate? People will just assume you’re bringing your boyfriend along for the ride, and they might object to paying for a consulting *team* when they could have *you*.”

Even though he’s poking holes in my plan, I’ve never been more proud of him. This is why I want him as my partner; his mind is constantly firing.

“Some people might think that, yes. But I have two responses for anyone who raises that objection.”

“And those are...” Aiden prompts when I don’t immediately volunteer my ideas.

“First, we don’t have to disclose our personal relationship to the people that hire us. They can think I found you so brilliant I just had to make you my work partner, which wouldn’t be wrong. And second, anyone who knows me knows I wouldn’t go into business with someone on a whim.”

“They might, if they know who I am to you.” He worries his lip in a way that makes me want to soothe it with my own.

“Even if they know that, they know how important my work is to me, so they’d come to the conclusion that I found my

perfect match.”

“They wouldn’t say he’s thinking with the wrong head? Going through a midlife crisis and trying to reclaim his youth. Now I get why you were so worried about my age.” He goes on a mini rant.

“If anyone does say that they don’t really know me. And once they meet you, they’ll know why I fell for you. Personally and professionally.”

Aiden’s lip seems to tremble as he takes a shaky breath. “You really want to start a business with me? That’s a pretty permanent step.”

“Isn’t that what we are? Permanent?” That’s not a fair question considering neither of us has knocked down the last barrier between us, but I’m asking anyway. He’s the one that’d be giving up his freedom at such a young age, and I want him to be certain, without any influence from me.

“I’d like us to be,” he whispers.

“I’d like that too.”

He gasps softly, almost as if he’s surprised by that. Or shocked that I admitted it. “Does this mean we don’t have to hide anymore?”

“No.” My heart seems to miss a beat as his face falls. “We still have to start the company, and I’d prefer not to have any scandal about us come out before that’s official.”

“Okay.” He puts on a brave face. “But can we at least celebrate the fact that you love me? Maybe with a New Year’s kiss?”

Apparently we don’t have to worry about that last barrier anymore.

“I never said that.” My attempt to keep a straight face is futile, and Aiden grins almost wickedly when he catches me trying to reel in my own.

“You didn’t have to. I feel it all the time, but especially when you make a gesture like this. Just like I know you feel how much I love you.”

“I do, Leanbh.” I sift my fingers through his hair, cupping the back of his neck so I can bring his mouth to mine.

When our lips brush together for the first time in months, I feel both grounded and weightless. Safe and free. This man... There’s no logical explanation for how quickly or deeply I fell for him, I only know I’m incomplete without him.

Though we’re both desperate for more, talk of the future—and our mutual confessions—seem to keep some of our baser urges at bay. I’m oddly grateful for that, because while my body craves his with increasing urgency, the fact we can kiss without expecting anything more is a powerful confession in and of itself. Our lust is strong, but our love is stronger.

Later, when I’m in my own bed as the clock strikes midnight, the memory of Aiden’s soft lips pressed against mine is so vivid it feels real, and I drift off with a goofy smile.

Chapter Eighteen

Aiden

JANUARY

The mid-morning sun fills my room with light, which seems appropriate given the fact I'm waking up from the most perfect night of my life.

Well, maybe it's a tie.

That first night with Kier was the previous title holder, and since I've yet to have better sex than I did in his hotel room, there's a solid argument it should still be number one. But last night he told me he loved me, something I've never heard outside of my family, and that might take the cake.

Holy shit! Kier loves me. And he wants to start a business with me.

I feel like the princess in that Disney movie my niece watches, the one where the obscure commoner is plucked from the crowd by the handsome prince, minus the glow up from a fairy godmother.

My life is literally the stuff of movies right now. I mean, I'm the guy who's always the friend, never the boyfriend, yet the AI community's hottest gay bachelor wants to share his business and his bed with *me*?

Who am I and what happened to the gay nerd that no one wanted to date?

Lifting my arms over my head I try to stretch out the morning stiffness only to realize I'm not stiff in the least. I'm not sure whether that's a being in love thing or a no homework hanging over my head thing, but either way, I feel great.

I'd feel greater if there was a tall, dark and handsome man in bed next to me, but knowing he loves me makes up for being alone. For now.

The grumbling in my stomach tells me it's probably closer to lunch than breakfast, so I put on some sweats and make my way downstairs for food. That's where my good mood evaporates. Instead of an empty kitchen, I find Bennet sitting at the island, staring at me with the same frown he used to give Damien before they became boyfriends.

In their case it was a precursor to some love/hate chemistry, but I'm pretty sure in my case it's closer to just hate. Or pent-up anger.

"Hey," I say lamely.

"Where were you?"

"Happy New Year to you too."

"Cut the cute shit, Aiden. That's not like you. Where were you last night?"

"Why?"

Bennet ticks his jaw. "Why? Because you're my best friend and I haven't seen you in ages since all you do is work. Because last night was a holiday and there was a party at the frat we both belong to but you weren't there. Because you don't talk to me any more."

He's not pissed, he's...worried?

"I was with a friend." I open the fridge to grab some juice.

"What friend?"

"You don't know him."

“Now would be a good time to fix that. Who is it?”

“No one. Stop worrying.” I pour myself a glass and sit at the opposite end of the island, as far from Bennet as I can get, which only makes him scowl harder. I’m half convinced he’s about to snort smoke when his face abruptly softens, and he slumps forward.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Damien, but you know that was about the shit in my own head, not you, so why are you punishing me with your secrets?”

He thinks I’m... Oh boy.

“That’s not what I’m doing.” I shake my head to back my words up.

“Says the guy who won’t tell me the name of his friend.” Bennet crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“I’m not withholding his name in some sort of revenge plot, I’m protecting him. And me.”

“Hold up.” He lifts a hand in a *stop* motion. “This is about *protection*? That’s what *I’m* for. Me and all your other roommates. You have a problem, we’ll fix it. Who’s giving you a hard time?”

“No one.”

“Who’s giving your friend a hard time then?”

“No one,” I insist. “I’m not in any trouble, Bennet. I promise.”

“Then what’s with all the secrecy and talk about protection?”

“I—” My jaw tries to form words, but none come out.

“Did I ruin our friendship by being secretive about Damien?” Bennet looks more distraught than I’ve ever seen him, and that includes after blowing his ACL and learning he might not play football again. I’ve always wondered if he was just putting on a brave face when he said he’d be okay if he never played again; now I can say for sure he wasn’t. But is he really that concerned about *me*?

I guess he values our friendship more than I've given him credit for these past few months.

“You didn’t ruin our friendship. I’ve...” I take a fortifying breath. “I’ve kind of gotten involved with someone I’m not supposed to, and I haven’t said anything because it would look bad for both of us if people knew. Plus, I didn’t want to force anyone to keep that secret since it would put them in an awkward spot.”

Protecting my roommates isn’t something I thought about until this moment, but once the words are out, I realize how valid they are. Knowing about me and Kier would make my roommates complicit, and I don’t want to do that to them.

Bennet isn’t having it though.

“Isn’t it more awkward to keep secrets? I thought you would’ve figured that out after what happened when I did it.”

“What do you mean?”

He looks at me like I’ve grown another head. “You found out I didn’t tell you about Damien and suddenly you’ve got all these projects and shit and you’re never around. You were clearly avoiding me.”

Shit! If I tell him the truth about that he’ll beat himself up over not seeing that I had a major crush on him, and the awkward cycle will just continue. I don’t want to lie, but that might be the best option here. Or maybe I can just selectively tell the truth.

“I was a little hurt...” *True.* “And upset at myself for not catching on sooner.” *Also true.* “But I wasn’t just avoiding you, I was avoiding a house full of couples when I was the only single guy.” *God is that true.*

“We made you feel weird in your own house?” Bennet looks like he’s about to be sick.

“Not weird, just...single.” I shrug since I don’t know how to explain that any better. “But I’m not now, so don’t feel like you have to do anything different.”

“Yeah, back to that.” Bennet’s frown returns. “I’m not thrilled about this whole *dating someone you shouldn’t* thing. What does that even mean, anyway? Are there rival computer science programs? Or is this one of those things where he goes against everything you believe, like you say the Earth is round and he says it’s flat, and you’re trying to protect your reputation?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s nothing like that.”

“Well, is he a criminal? Old enough to be your dad? You don’t have a stepbrother, right?”

“No, eww—my dad’s seventy-five, and no, we don’t have any non-blood-related family ties.”

“Well, fuck Aiden. If it’s not any of those things I don’t see what the big deal is. The only other even remotely forbidden thing you could do is date a professor, and you’d never—” Bennet cuts himself off at the last second as realization sinks in. “The book guy?” He stares at me slack-jawed.

“Hmm?” I feign confusion even though I know my face is red enough to give me away.

“He’s your professor *and* your boss. The one you went to hear speak. Him?”

“Technically, he’s not my professor.”

“Technically, I’m not gay, but I’m still dating a man,” he fires right back.

“What’s your point?”

“No one will give a shit that’s not *technically* your professor.”

“Why do you think we’re keeping it a secret?” I throw my hands up.

“Okay, fair.” Bennet pinches the bridge of his nose like he’s fighting a headache. “How does something like that even happen anyway? He works at the school, is he just perving on the students?”

The glare I send Bennet's way has him shrinking in his chair. "No, he isn't perving on the students. We randomly met after his speech in Denver, hooked up before either of us knew he'd end up working here, and got the shock of our lives when I reported to his office and found him there."

Bennet whistles in a way that sort of sounds like *whew* although it's not in relief. More like *dayum*.

"Am I allowed to ask what the plan is here? I mean, I assume you wouldn't risk fucking him if it's not serious."

"I'm not fucking him. Not currently." If I thought Bennet looked shocked before that's nothing compared to his expression now, jaw hanging to the floor as he just stares vacantly at me. "We're together but not *together* while I'm his assistant."

"So all the time you spend working you're actually *working*?"

"Mostly. Sometimes we just talk. He made me Thanksgiving dinner and we had a picnic at the computer lab. And I took him sledding last night since he lives in Colorado now and needed to get out in the snow."

"I can't decide if the *together not together* makes things more or less serious." Bennet really does look like his head might explode. Secret fucking he gets, secret talking he doesn't.

Actually, when I put it that way, I'm not sure I get it either. We're just *talking*. Mostly. If we're going to sneak around like we're doing something wrong, maybe we should be doing something wrong.

"More serious. Definitely more," I say, because otherwise, we're abstaining for nothing. Not that our careers are nothing, but right about now I'm less concerned about that since he has a plan where we get to make our own rules.

"Yeah, I guess things would be pretty serious if you're waiting for each other instead of breaking the rules. Although I'm still not clear on what rule you'd actually be breaking. If he's not your teacher, I mean."

I worry my lip while searching for the right words. “It’s more the perception of favoritism or special treatment people might assume I get if I’m dating an expert in the field I want to enter.”

“You’re dating who?”

I whip my head around just in time to see Damien strolling into the kitchen. He steps behind Bennet, nuzzles his neck until Bennet—smiling begrudgingly—shrugs to dislodge him, and chuckles as he grabs the protein powder and milk.

“Well?” Damien asks.

“It’ll stay in the house,” Bennet assures me.

“A guy who works at the university,” I tell him.

“His boss,” Bennet adds.

“The hottie from karaoke?” Damien halts mid-pour and almost spills the milk. “Nice.”

“How do you know that’s my boss?” I ask.

“Excuse me?” Bennet narrows his eyes at Damien.

“What?” Damien asks him before turning to me. “Bennet told me you work for him.”

“You can’t look at other guys.” Bennet glares at Damien.

“I wasn’t *looking*, looking. I was observing. And I observed that that guy was hot.” He turns to me and winks. “Scandalous.”

“Eyes off, Damien.” Bennet locks his jaw.

“So possessive.” Damien rolls his eyes, but his coy smirk suggests he likes Bennet that way. “So—” he turns to me “—how’d you snag that one?”

“I—”

“What do you mean how’d you snag him? Are you taking notes?” Bennet looks ready to snap a tooth.

“I’m asking what Aiden did to make a guy risk his career,” Damien says. “Is he a great employee? Is the guy into his brilliant mind? Does he give great head? That sort of thing.”

“You can’t ask that,” Bennet tells him.

“Why not? He can ask me how I snagged you.” Damien holds a hand up in front of his mouth like he’s whispering to me, even though his volume doesn’t change. “I amuse him. He hates to admit it, but I do. And I give great head.”

“Jesus,” Bennet mutters.

“Uh, TMI Damien,” I tell my newest roommate.

“We’re all friends here.” Damien shrugs. “Plus, you’ve probably heard me blowing him so it’s not like I’m telling you something you don’t already know.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not telling you about my sex life,” I tell Damien.

“What sex life?” Bennet snorts, most unhelpfully.

“You’re dating someone you aren’t sleeping with?” Damien’s jaw hits the floor.

“There’s a conflict of interest,” I point out. “And I have slept with him, I’m just not currently sleeping with him.”

“Still not sure what rule favoritism is breaking,” Bennet says. “Besides, your boyfriend is an expert in the field, if he says you know your shit won’t other people listen?”

“Maybe?” I shrug. “But right now he’s the most qualified person at this school to speak to my knowledge, and he doesn’t want to jeopardize my future opportunities by giving people a reason to think his judgment is clouded.”

“But you’re still dating?” Damien scrunches his nose.

“No one knows that. Except you two,” I tell them.

“Oh, you’re a secret boyfriend too? I remember that phase,” Damien recalls, since he was Bennet’s secret until Bennet was ready to come out. “It’s kinda fun in an *I know something you don’t way*.”

“His boyfriend is out, babe,” Bennet tells Damien. “But for the purpose of Aiden’s future, they’re both secret.”

“I know,” Damien says as he takes the stool next to Bennet. “I’m just saying I remember what that’s like. And here I thought you were actually working all those times you said you were working.” Damien winks at me conspiratorially.

“They were working,” Bennet says.

“Seriously? You mean you’re really not sneaking off to his place to fuck? I thought you were just sticking to your story.”

“We’re not sneaking off to his place,” I tell Damien.

“Why not?” He looks at me like I’m crazy. “No one would know.”

“I—” I snap my mouth shut before I can answer. *Why aren’t we doing that? Damien’s right, no one would know.*

“Looks like you just gave him something to think about.” Bennet wraps an arm around Damien’s waist and pulls him in for a side hug.

Yes, you did.

Chapter Nineteen

Kier

“What are you doing here?” I roll back from the desk when Aiden lets himself into my office. It’s the first time he’s been in this room since that fateful day when we first saw each other again back in August, and while I’m always happy to see him, I’m confused by this sudden change in our usual pattern.

We’ve never made a rule about it or anything, but I’m fairly certain we both know being alone in this room is too much temptation. It’s different in the lab, where there’s work to be done, and the possibility that anyone else might walk in. But I can lock my office door, so by unspoken agreement we avoid that lure.

“I wanted to see you.” He closes the door, and I can’t be certain, but it’s possible I hear a faint click as he does.

“You just saw me in the lab this morning.”

“Yes, but I didn’t see you for nearly five days before that since campus was closed, and all we did this morning was work.” He strides across the room, rounds my desk, and perches his ass on the edge, right in front of my chair, putting his crotch in line with my mouth.

I clear my throat. “That’s what we do in the lab. Work.”

“True.” He cocks his head to the side and gives me a sensual once-over. “But during those five days I didn’t see you, I started wondering *why* I didn’t see you.”

“You said it yourself; campus was closed.”

“I could see you off campus.” He drags his tongue along his lower lip in the way he knows I love.

“We got away with that once, I’m not sure we should do it again.”

“I’m not suggesting we go out in public. I’m suggesting we could meet at your place, where no one would be the wiser.”

My cock starts to fill behind my zipper, clearly on board with this idea, but all the blood hasn’t run south yet.

“Leanbh, as much as I want to say yes, it’s an unnecessary risk.”

“In what way? Do you live on campus? Have a roommate? Is your front door monitored by the university?”

“That’s not the kind of risk I’m worried about.” I fight to keep my body under control, because I’ve always found assertive Aiden sexy, and that’s not the way I should be thinking of him right now, at work, where any number of my colleagues could be just on the other side of the door.

He throws his hands up in exasperation. “Well then what are you talking about? Because from where I’m sitting, we could be putting ourselves out of this misery starting today.”

Fisting my hands so tight the knuckles turn white I tell him, “I’m afraid if I let myself cave any more than I already have I won’t be able to stop. I’ll want to touch you every time I see you, steal kisses when I think no one’s looking, drag you in here and block out the world while I do dirty things to you. But if I don’t touch you at all, maybe the cravings won’t get any worse.”

The words that were intended as a warning have the opposite effect and leave Aiden biting his lip as he rolls his hips, creating friction on the prominent bulge in his jeans.

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” I hiss. “You’re just thinking about it, and you’re damn near writhing on my desk.”

“That’s because it’s been so long. And what if you’re wrong?” His eyes flutter shut as he tries to keep his pelvis still. “What if a calculated risk in the privacy of your home makes it so that we can behave at work?”

My body wants me to give in, to mimic Aiden’s gyrations, but I still have concerns.

“What if I can’t get my guard up once I let it down? Right now, I can just barely look at you without the lust taking over. I have to physically tear my eyes away from you before I broadcast what I’m thinking. It’s why I’m so careful to avoid you outside the lab.”

“You can still avoid me outside the lab if that makes you feel better, just don’t avoid me *period*.”

I suck in a ragged breath. “Is that how you feel? Like I’ve been avoiding you?”

Aiden stills, casting his eyes downward with a slight shake of his head. “No. I mean, I know you aren’t, but it does sometimes feel that way.”

The last thing I’d ever want to do is make Aiden think he’s anything less than the most important thing in my life. I thought I was showing him how important he is by putting his future first, but maybe that’s not enough. Maybe he needs to *feel* that instead of just knowing it.

No wonder his vulnerable side is coming out. In a bold way, but maybe that’s a defense mechanism. Asserting himself to hide his vulnerability.

Resting my palm on the outside of his thigh, I give his leg a gentle squeeze. He sighs and brings his eyes to mine.

“Nothing can change here. If anything, we need to be even more careful. No contact outside the lab. All communication only about work, and only through email. And absolutely zero touching, even if we think we’re in the clear.”

Aiden looks at my hand on his leg, and I pull it back like I've been shocked, earning myself a frustrated huff.

"Damien didn't say being secret boyfriends came with so many rules," he mutters, and while I'm not sure I'm supposed to hear it, I do.

"Damien? What's he telling you about secret boyfriends? And why?"

Aiden has the decency to look slightly guilty as he confesses. "Bennet freaked out when I didn't show up to a party on New Years, and in the process of defusing that situation it came out that you're slightly more than just someone I work with. And Damien tried to be supportive about the whole thing by relating to me as a secret boyfriend, since that's what he was before Bennet came out."

Jesus that's a lot to process. And it also explains so much.

"Okay, back up. Bennet was in the closet when he was dating Damien? And they equate our situation to theirs? Do I have that right?"

"Yes and no. Obviously our situation is different, but the secret part of it Damien identifies with since Bennet was pretending to be straight while sorting stuff out with Damien, and they only ever met in secret at Damien's place."

"Now I see how we got here. They made it work so you think we can too. But I assume they had rules like the ones I'm suggesting."

He nods solemnly. "Outside the house they were just teammates. They didn't have the communication restrictions though."

"Well, I doubt either of them would've been kicked out of school if someone stumbled on their personal chats."

Aiden gives me a begrudging look before mumbling, "Fair."

"So, you agree to the rules?" I press.

"When do they take effect? Because I'm kind of dying here." I follow his gaze to the obvious bulge in his pants and bite back a laugh.

Most of the time he's so mature, but the times when he isn't are just... *refreshing*.

"Immediately, Leanbh. They take effect immediately. But I have something that might help with that." I reach for a pile of papers on my desk.

"Yeah, nothing kills a boner like paperwork." He gives me a wry look.

"Not just any paperwork. Our business paperwork. I've been filling out as much as I can, but we can't start a business without a name. What should we call it?"

The pouty face morphs into a broad grin. "You want me to help name the company?"

"I reserve the right to veto, but yeah. I think we should do this together."

Aiden traps his lips between his teeth, to stop himself from kissing me I think, and says, "We should name it after your dad since he's your inspiration."

And here I thought I couldn't love him any more.

"I love that idea, Leanbh. Truly. But I'm not sure Cormac is the way to go. Besides, if we're going with inspiration, we should include yours."

"Star Wars?" He snorts. "I'm not sure that's the way to go either. What about our names? Or initials?"

"Boring." I shake my head.

"Last names too? SinCal or CalSin don't sound too bad."

"CalSin Consulting?" I try it out. "Not bad, but it doesn't say AI or prosthetics."

"CalSin Biomechatronics Consulting. Or CBC?"

"It should CSBC if we abbreviate it, but yeah. I can see it." A wistful smile tugs at the corner of my lip. "Sounds official."

"Think it'll make people take us seriously? Even after they find out about us?" Aiden doesn't sound worried, just curious.

“I think the work we’re doing right now will go a long way toward making that happen. Regardless of how we met or when we became official, the advancements we’ve made this year have merit. And remember, no one needs to know about our personal relationship until well after we’re established.”

“I’m not sure I want to hide indefinitely though. I don’t need people thinking you’re on the market when you’re not.”

“Same.” I grin like a fool, but I’m not even self-conscious about it. Not since it makes him smile in return.

“So, my dirty little secret—” I playfully pinch the thigh that’s still within arm’s reach “—should I expect you at my house this weekend?”

“The whole weekend.” Aiden lights up like the beautiful angel he is, making me feel like a damn superhero.

“Obviously.”

“Yes, please. Just text me—I mean write down your address on a piece of paper I will commit to memory and then destroy.” He bats his lashes in a way only someone with his youthful looks could get away with.

“Smartass,” I mutter as I reach for a pen and scribble out my address.

“You love my ass.” He leans forward a few inches, stopping about a foot away from my mouth when he realizes what he’s doing.

“See, Leanbh. It’s a slippery slope,” I caution despite the fact I make no move to pull back. I’m too focused on his full lips, tempting me to close the distance.

We linger there far longer than is advised, savoring the chemistry we’re finally allowing ourselves to feel. Even though we don’t act on it—not yet—it’s palpable. A tether between us that only seems to have grown stronger in the months we’ve been trying to ignore its existence. I knew it hadn’t gone anywhere, of course, but giving it free reign to flow through me has me vibrating with restless energy. A bone-deep need for more of the man before me.

Soon.

Aiden seductively wets his lips and stands up, chest rising and falling in carefully measured breaths designed to help him maintain some semblance of control. I know because I'm breathing the same way.

"Friday?" He takes the paper from my hand, fingers brushing ever so slightly over mine.

"Friday." My hooded eyes follow him out the door, though it's another several minutes before my heartbeat returns to normal.

Chapter Twenty

Aiden

My knee bounces erratically in the back seat of the Uber taking me to Kier's house for the first time.

I'm so nervous.

Why am I nervous? It's not like we haven't done this before. True, that was nearly a year ago, and since then we've grown even closer. We're planning a future together for God's sake. Is that what has me freaking out? That this isn't just a hookup solely to get off?

I mean, there is that. I haven't had a proper orgasm since we watched each other jerk off several weeks ago, and before that—hell, before that it dates back to that first night. But even then, what started as lust morphed into something deeper the instant we came together. It sounds corny, but it's almost like our souls knew what our bodies were just figuring out, and everything sort of morphed together to create this magical connection.

That doesn't just sound corny, it sounds delusional.

Oddly enough, that assessment doesn't give me second thoughts. Yes, things are moving at lightning speed, and yes, that's contrary to everything my science-minded brain is wired for. But sometimes, even in science, you have to go with your gut.

Besides, I told myself after that first brush with heartbreak that I wouldn't hold back the next time I was interested in someone, and I'm going to honor that. It's what led to that first night with Kier, so obviously that decision served me well.

Still, as I watch the dot on my phone move closer to the destination, I feel anxious.

Our one night together was life changing, not only because it bound us together in ways that altered the course of our lives, but because the sex was off the charts.

Seriously, I had no idea it could be that good.

You could make the argument that I should've realized that based on the soundtrack that plays on a near constant loop in my house, with one of the three couples invariably fucking at any given time. But hearing other people come undone doesn't fully prepare you to experience it yourself.

You want to, obviously. I challenge anyone to hear my roommates going at it and not dream about having the kind of sex that pulls inhuman noises from your throat. And when it was my turn—holy hell. It became instantly clear why my roommates fuck *all the time*. Who wouldn't if it turned your world upside down on the regular?

And like any sane person, I've wanted to repeat that experience every day since then. At the same time, that was ages ago, so I'm worried things might be different now. I don't know how they would be, but eight months is a long time, so who knows.

Supposedly sex with someone you love is the best kind there is, so Kier and I should have nothing to worry about. Being in love doesn't put me at ease though. It only adds more pressure to make things perfect.

Maybe I should've let things evolve naturally rather than scheduling sex. If I didn't know it was going to happen, I wouldn't have time to build up all these worries in my head.

Yeah, in hindsight that's probably what I should've done. But I can't change it now. I'm the one who asked for this.

Begged really. I can't show fear or second thoughts. I've got to take charge. March right in there and get down to business.

My cock throbs between my legs, totally on board with that idea.

Horny bastard.

I'm still nervous as the car pulls up to his cute little bungalow-style home, but less so than I was now that I have a plan in place.

I rap confidently on the door, pasting a hungry look on my face.

A savory scent wafts from the house when Kier opens the door, and for a brief moment I'm tempted to forgo that plan and eat the dinner he says he just pulled from the oven, since I know what a sweet gesture he intended to make by cooking. But he looks so sexy barefoot with a dishtowel slung over his shoulder that I stick to my original idea.

Placing a hand on his chest, I gently but firmly back him into the house, kick the door shut, and press him against the wall, exactly as he did with me when he took me to his hotel room.

"The only thing I want in my mouth right now is your dick. And after that, I'm gonna put mine in your ass. And after that, if you're up for it, you can have mine." I crush my mouth to his, stealing his response. I don't even know what it would've been, I just know it doesn't matter.

I need him.

His mouth opens with a throaty sigh, tongue meeting mine with the same urgency I feel in my bones. The same desperation to make up for months of lost time that's consumed my every waking moment since I stepped into his office just over five months ago.

The tiniest hint of stubble scratches my face as I tilt my head to deepen the kiss, the slight burn a welcome reminder that this is real. My mouth is plastered to Kier's, sharing his air, his cock stiffening against my thigh.

“Leanbh.” His fingers tunnel into my hair, holding my face to his. “We have more than one night this time,” he says, even as he pulls me closer.

“Don’t care. Too horny.”

“Is this what life will be like with you?” One of his hands leaves my hair to cup my dick, kneading it gently over the denim covering it. “Demanding sex first thing when you walk in the door to our home?”

My lips freeze against the jaw I’m nuzzling. “Our home?” I mumble.

“Did you think we’d start a business together and live separately?”

I pull back just enough to see the comforting smile on his face, the hand on my cock virtually forgotten. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Well, I have. And when I finally get to call you mine in front of everyone, we won’t be sleeping in different beds.” A slight tingle between my legs reminds me he’s palming my dick, and my hips develop a mind of their own, pushing into him wantonly so he resumes rubbing it. “Is that a yes? You’ll jump me every time you walk in the door?”

“Maybe.” I lick along his bottom lip before nipping at it playfully. “If you can keep up.”

“That hasn’t been a problem so far.” Keir drags his fingers over the denim before cupping me again.

“I’m willing to test that. Take your cock out and put it in my mouth.” I give him a long, lewd kiss and drop to my knees, licking my lips hungrily.

Kier’s fingers shake as he unfastens his pants and pushes his clothes off his hips, freeing his beautiful dick. It bobs enticingly a few times, settling when it’s pointed right at my mouth.

Palms on Kier’s thighs, I lean forward to rub my cheek along his length, inhaling deeply so I can fill my lungs with his scent. I didn’t get to do this the first time, and I’ve always

regretted it. Yet as I breathe in his musk that has a hint of fresh air and pine—most likely from his soap—I’m actually glad to be discovering it now. It gives this moment an added intimacy that we’ve earned through months of hardship, making it somehow more poignant.

“Leanbh.” Kier’s voice is both relieved and pleading, exactly the way my own would be if I tried to speak. Since I’m not capable of that, I nuzzle my way back to his crown and feather my lips over its surface.

His thick length bobs again, begging for more, but I have no intention of rushing this. Aside from the fact I want him near delirious with need, his cock is a work of art that deserves careful attention. Soft, loving caresses that express my admiration, which will be followed by desperate, relentless sucking when he can’t take any more.

I do take a little mercy on him and palm his nuts, rolling them gently around my fingers as I lavish his tip with languid kisses.

Kier’s thigh muscles flex under my hands, betraying the effort it’s taking for him to hold still while I savor his cock. My own are shaking with the restraint it takes not to swivel my hips in a vain attempt to increase the friction on my dick, but this moment is all about him, so even if they’re too weak to hold my weight later, I’ll stay kneeling until his release fills my throat.

“Leanbh,” he moans again, fingers tightening their hold on my hair. I open just enough to fit his crown in my mouth, slurping gently at the smooth head while his hips lose the battle to stay still and press slightly forward, silently asking me to take a little more.

I will, just not yet.

Peering up from under hooded eyes, I take in the erratic rise and fall of Kier’s chest. The plump lips parted just enough to breathe. The rosy cheeks coloring his fair complexion.

I’ve never seen anything sexier.

How is this man mine?

I let him out of my mouth with a soft pop and lick a stripe from root to tip, covering my tongue in his woodsy, salty flavor. Then I press his cock up to his stomach so I can suck his balls.

Using a gentle suction, I pull first one, then the other, into my mouth. Kier hums softly as I cover them, swirling my tongue around and between them so he feels me everywhere. Then, for good measure, I seal my lips around one and pull my head back to give it a tug.

Kier gasps then groans, a sound that my cock responds to so forcefully I have to open my zipper and let it out. But I don't touch it since I want all my focus on him.

I let Kier's dick fall from his stomach and wrap my lips around the crown, sucking gently as his head presses against the wall behind him.

"More Leanbh," he rasps as his hips get bolder. "More."

Figuring I've edged him enough, I oblige, sinking over his length until my nose brushes his pelvis. I look up to find his heated eyes taking in the carnal scene, and nearly come.

Kier's eyes have a vivid, almost icy blue ring around wide pupils, jaw locked tight as his throat bobs on a swallow. It looks like it's taking every last bit of his strength to hold on, and it's such a sinful sight my balls draw up tight, threatening to burst. I could hold my dick in hand—not even stroking it, just enclosing it in a light grip—and I'd blow. Instead I dig my fingertips into Kier's thighs, holding onto them so I'm not tempted to grab my shaft.

"Do you know how often I dreamed of having your lips wrapped around my cock again?" His fingers massage my scalp. "Watching you swallow me. Seeing the bliss on your face even though it's *my* dick in your mouth—that's the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

I hum around his cock, whether to thank him for or merely just acknowledge the praise, I'm not sure, but it makes him groan with unabashed desire.

Bobbing on his cock makes it hard to breathe, but taking him to the back of my throat damn near chokes me. Still, I don't relent. Nothing matters but taking this man to nirvana and hearing my name on his lips as climbs higher and higher.

Jaw aching, eyes watering, I hollow my cheeks with each pass, sucking as hard as my depleted lungs will allow. When that first rope of cum hits the back of my throat I take him deep and swallow around his length, pulling out every last drop as he gasps around stilted efforts to moan my name.

Feeling him pulse in my mouth has my own dick valiantly trying to join his, precum leaking from my slit as it twitches in midair. Then suddenly, as Kier gives a final, prolonged groan, it bursts.

I let go of Kier's thigh and wrap my hand around my length, I think in an effort to stop the inevitable, which doesn't work in the least. My cock throbs in my palm, filling my hand with my own release, and the feral moan that spills from my throat vibrates around his dick, making it quiver anew.

When I've milked him of every last drop I let him fall from my mouth, resting my head against his thigh as his fingers tenderly cradle my head. Several long minutes pass before either of us dare to do anything other than breathe, and Kier tips my head up by my chin so he can see my eyes.

"You're shaking," he says.

"I—yeah."

"Are you okay?" The icy blue ring still surrounds his pupils, but instead of lust his eyes hold nothing but love.

"Perfect." I smile lazily.

"Are you..." I think he intends to ask me if I'm sure, but he catches sight of my hand, coated in my own cum.

"I tried to stop it before I made a mess." I lift my shoulder in an attempt to shrug but don't have the energy to complete the act.

"Wait, that's... Sucking my cock made you come?" He blinks in disbelief.

“Yeah,” I say dreamily, since my brain is too fogged to think properly.

“Leanbh,” he murmurs, stroking my cheek with his thumb. “That is so hot. And beautiful. You make me want to ravage you and hold you at the same time. How is that possible?”

“I don’t know.” Since my mouth is still right next to his dick I give it a chaste kiss, remembering only as I taste the remnants of his release on my lips that mine is still in my hand.

No point in letting it go to waste.

I slide my slippery fingers between his cheeks, probing gently at the hole I told him I’d be buried in later.

He stiffens briefly before relaxing. “What are you doing?”

“Prepping. I—oh shit.” I pull my hand back, going from post orgasmic haze to high alert in point two seconds. “I’m sorry. I didn’t get any in you, I swear. And I’m clean. I got tested after Denver, and I haven’t been with anyone since you.”

“Leanbh,” he says soothingly. “I’m not worried about that. I’m worried that you look exhausted.”

“Just blissed out, not exhausted. Look, already trying to rally.” He follows my eyes to my crotch, where my cock isn’t rallying exactly, but is expressing curiosity over where my hands just were.

Kier gives me a weak smile. “It’s going to take me a little time to catch up. That’s what you get with me.”

I think that’s meant to be another age quip—as if more recovery time is a mark against him—but I’m not concerned. “That just leaves more time for foreplay. Help me up so we can try the couch next.”

I can’t believe I was worried things wouldn’t be as magical.

Chapter Twenty-One

Kier

Having a boyfriend ten years my junior is invigorating and depressing.

On the one hand, he came without any assistance from me, unless you count my cock in his mouth, and if that doesn't make me a rockstar I don't know what does. But on the other hand, he's already hard, and I'm sporting a semi.

At least he doesn't seem bothered by the extra amount of time it takes me to go another round. He might actually enjoy it, since he spends that time thoroughly exploring every inch of my body to catalog what I like. And I like everything he does. All of it. My body just isn't helping me express that as quickly as I'd like it to.

Still, he's not complaining, and for that I'm grateful. I'm grateful, period, since I can't imagine my life without him.

To think I almost let his lie of omission come between us. I know I had a right to be upset, but I handled it poorly, putting all the blame on him when I absolutely wouldn't have given him the time of day—no matter how pretty he is—if I thought he was just another fan trying to pick my brain. Thank God he gave me the time to come around and fix that mistake instead of locking the emotional doorway that opened between us in Denver.

I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but here right now, in my living room, sitting naked atop an equally naked Aiden as my hands roam his body.

“Why is blue your favorite color?” My hands skim along his collarbone.

“Have you seen your eyes?”

I arch my brow as those eyes find his. “Okay, I'll rephrase. *How long* has blue been your favorite color?”

“Ages. But before you it was just blue, now it's a very specific shade of blue. Or shades. Somewhere in between sapphire and cobalt, just like how your eyes change in different light. Why is green yours?”

“Ireland. The land is so impossibly green it just... takes your breath away.”

“Will you take me sometime?”

“Of course. If you take me to a Japanese penis festival.” I give one of his nipples a little pinch, which has his cock twitching next to mine.

Hello, we seem to like that.

“I've never even been to it. I just thought it sounded fun.” Aiden's cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink, making me question whether I may need to revisit my favorite color.

“It does sound fun. Going anywhere with you sounds fun.” I lean forward to touch his kissable lips with mine and feel him quiver again. This time, so do I.

Aiden's seductive eyes follow me as I pull back, skating down my torso, coming to rest on our side-by-side cocks. “I really like this view.” He bites his lip, so of course I'm hit with another tremor.

Then he does it again. And again.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Testing a theory.”

“And?” I prompt.

“It turns you on when I bite my lip.” He looks up at me from under hooded lids.

“That’s not a theory, it’s a fact.”

“A fact I couldn’t confirm until just now.” He tries so hard not to bite that lip he has to trap them between his teeth.

“Well, use that power wisely so you don’t make me spring an erection at work.”

He bobs his head and reaches for our cocks, taking them both in his hand and stroking them languidly.

“Remember how earlier you said you weren’t worried about getting my cum in you?”

“Yes.” I sigh into the pleasure he’s giving me.

“Did you mean it?”

“Are you asking to fuck me bare?”

“Yes.” He flutters his long lashes.

“I’d be offended if you didn’t.”

“Really?” His amber eyes grow wide.

“Leanbh, I don’t intend to have another man inside my body again, ever. It’s yours to pleasure, to use, to mark. I want you to fill it, just like I want to fill yours, so there’s no question who we belong to.”

“Jesus, Maoin.” He lets go of our dicks long enough to show me how swollen his is. “I swear you can get me off with just your words.”

“Maoin?” I tilt my head to the side as he bites that lip again, *dammit*.

“Isn’t that Irish for *mine*?” The blush that had started to fade comes right back. “I know it means to own property and you obviously aren’t my property, but you already took baby, and even if you have a fancy name for it, it seems silly to call each other the same thing. I think that rules babe out too, since they’re so similar, and I don’t think either of us has a daddy kink—”

“Aiden.” I cut him off by pressing my lips to his. “I love it.”

“Yeah?” He traps our cocks in his hand again and just holds them against one another.

“Yeah, Leanbh. Yours.”

I kiss him again, long and slow and tender, losing myself in his taste. His touch. *Him*. I can't seem to get enough, which is a totally foreign yet not unwanted feeling.

Having fucked around quite a bit in my early twenties, I was more interested in the destination than the journey. Kissing took too much time, and maybe it was a little too intimate, so other than using them as the obligatory start to sex, I didn't bother with them. Yet kissing Aiden is so fulfilling I have no desire to stop. Not even when my lips start to chafe, and his chin turns slightly pink from the stubble that inevitably makes an appearance on my face at the end of the day. I'm just... obsessed, I guess.

“Maoin?” Aiden says tentatively when we finally break apart.

“Yes, Leanbh?”

“I think I need to mark you now. Where's your lube?”

Digging through the side table next to him, I pull out the bottle I'd proactively stashed there. One of several I put in every corner in the house, just in case.

Aiden releases our dicks and coats his fingers, rubbing them together to warm the liquid, then reaches behind me to probe my hole.

Just as before, I'm impossibly tight, and I briefly wonder if I should've been working myself all along so that I'd be more ready. But I shove that thought away once I realize it'd be an empty feeling to pleasure myself without Aiden. Besides, my body quickly remembers what it's like to be filled, allowing him entry with little more than a gentle push.

A pleasant hum rolls up my throat as he fills me, nerve endings that haven't been stimulated in months firing as his finger coaxes them awake. Pulses of pleasure shoot up my

spine and into my limbs as my cock stiffens further, a hint of the coming bliss coiling at the base.

As his finger probes deeper, my body subtly undulates in rhythm with his touch. The slight movement presses our cocks together, and as he said earlier, it's a heady view. Our two shafts rubbing along each other, the hint of precum making the crowns gleam, and Aiden's lean abs as the backdrop to the hedonistic image... It's as erotic as it is filthy.

The first brush of his finger against my prostate has me groaning with a mixture of satisfaction and need. It feels so good I press against him, trying to work him deeper. To increase the pressure on that sensitive button.

"I dreamed about that sound." He crooks his finger, pulling another one from my throat. "Every night. I replayed it in my mind, over and over so I'd never forget it."

"You thought you'd never hear it again," I whisper softly.

"Yes," he agrees.

Leaning forward, I speak against his lips. "It's yours, just like the rest of me. You're the only one who will ever hear it."

Aiden takes a shaky breath as our mouths meet in a sweet, tender kiss. They stay pressed together, sharing each other's air, as he adds another finger. This time, he swallows the moan he elicits.

The added pressure feels divine, the slick slide of his fingers coaxing my hips to move a little faster. Grind a little deeper.

"Leanbh." His name is a plea, though I'm not sure what I'm begging for. As much as I want to find the nirvana I know he can give me, I want to take my time getting there. To savor the sensations he's creating right now, for as long as my body will let me. So I'm not asking for more, though I may be asking for more of the same.

I press my forehead to his and close my eyes, relishing his closeness. The feel of his body underneath mine. The fact that this beautiful man wants me as much as I want him.

“What do you need Maoín?” His fingers advance and retract with exaggerated care while expertly hitting my prostate and sending wave after wave of ecstasy throughout my body.

“Just you.”

“You have me.” With our foreheads touching Aiden’s amber eyes are a bit of a blur, but the intensity of their gaze is just as potent as if they were clear.

This is the start of forever.

True, we’ve discussed our future together, set plans in motion to make it happen, but until now that was just talk. This moment makes it real. A confirmation of that dream.

All those times I asked myself if I was crazy to fall for someone so young, if we were moving too fast, if I was really going to risk everything for him—fade to nothing. They don’t matter, because I know in my heart we belong together.

Aiden may be young, but he’s my equal in every other way. And his youth brings a vitality to my life that I’d long since forgotten about when work started to consume my thoughts. Together, we’ll be able to pursue our passions while reminding each other to have fun. To be happy.

We may be an unlikely couple, but we *are* meant to be. There’s no doubt in my mind.

I brush my lips over his and whisper, “Mark me, Leanbh,” before plunging my tongue inside.

Something between a whimper and a growl fills my mouth as he pulls his fingers free, the cushion beside us vibrating as his hand smacks it, searching for the lube that he pushes into my hand. “Get me ready?”

My hands shake as I squeeze out the liquid, not from nerves, though not from excitement either. There’s just something so intimate about his request, adding another layer of depth to an already emotional moment. I know it’s silly—we’re talking about lubing his cock—but it feels like he’s giving me control over his body, a top from the bottom type of scenario, and to me that speaks to our connection and the level of trust we have in each other.

After rubbing my hands together to warm the lube, I take Aiden's dick in my right hand, dragging it from base to tip and immediately repeating the motion with my left. Over and over, I run each hand up his length, coating it in the liquid that will help him enter me.

Head propped against the back of the couch, Aiden's eyes drift shut as I stroke him, as if he's basking in the pleasure of my touch. Enjoying the way it feels to have my hands running over his length with nothing but tender care, and a hint of lust.

"I missed this," he says softly. "Your hands on me, making me feel beautiful."

"You are beautiful, Leanbh." I brush my thumb over his crown. "Stunning actually, with pink cheeks to match your pink nipples." He sucks in a breath as I give one a gentle pinch then resume lubing his cock.

"I believe you, when you touch me like this."

I'm not really sure how to respond to that other than to kiss him, so I bring my mouth to his while lining him up to my entrance. Our lips just barely meet, hovering sensually, as I sink onto his length, both of us groaning as we come together.

The fit is snug—Aiden has a nice, thick cock—and for several long moments we just sit there, joined, sharing our air as we wait for our bodies to adapt.

When the initial pressure fades enough that we don't have to fight back the temptation to come, Aiden looks at me with those rich caramel eyes and says, "Fuck yourself on my cock, Maoin. Use it however it makes you feel good."

It already feels good, but taking his words to heart, I sit tall and spread my legs a fraction wider so I can take him as deep as our bodies will allow. That slight adjustment makes it so that his shaft brushes against my prostate with hardly any effort at all. I don't have to bounce on his dick, I can just grind on his length and see fireworks behind my eyelids.

Eyes locked, I roll my hips so slightly it doesn't look like I'm moving at all, but that subtle rotation has us both groaning

in ecstasy. Then I notice Aiden's lips moving as if he's murmuring, though no sound comes out.

"Are you counting?" I ask.

"It's the only way to guarantee I don't come too soon. Don't laugh," he says when he notices the smile trying to take over my face. "Your ass is... And the way your abs clench even though you're barely moving... Meanwhile your cock is so big and hard and gorgeous and... I think this is my new favorite position."

I swivel my pelvis while simultaneously trying to push down so I can take him deeper, and once again we both moan rapturously. Aiden reaches for my cock, stroking it leisurely as I delicately grind on his dick.

"Damn you're sexy like this." His fingers graze along my length.

"I was thinking the same thing about you."

"My pale, innocent face is not sexy. Not like your dark, mysterious look."

"Your pale, innocent face does look sort of angelic." His hand stills on my shaft as his eyes grow wide, and I have to bite back a coy smile as I finish my point. "It makes me want to corrupt you, but you're already corrupt, aren't you?" He hisses as I finger one of his nipples.

"You think I'm corrupt?"

"It was your idea for me to fuck myself on your cock." I arch a knowing brow.

"True. I wasn't expecting you to go so slow." His thumb circles my crown.

"You don't like it?"

"I love it. But it's been so long I was expecting you to ride me hard. This is a different kind of torture." His hand glides along my shaft.

"How so?"

“Hard and fast I just have to hold my breath to hold back. But slow is unpredictable. Erotic as hell, but the pleasure spikes out of nowhere.” He clenches his teeth when I swivel my pelvis, and I have to fight back a proud smile.

“You did tell me to make myself feel good.”

“I know,” he grits as he reaches for the lube, squirting a healthy drop onto his fingers and rubbing them together before he puts them around my shaft again. “And I love it. Too much.”

His slick fingers trace up and down my length, a faint touch I find myself arching my hips forward to chase.

Little tease.

I fight the urge to try to fuck my cock into his hand, concentrating instead on the refined movements that seem to be just as potent as riding him hard. All the while his fingers do unspeakable things to my dick. Tracing it, drawing circles on it, occasionally giving it a good pump. Coupled with the constant pressure on my prostate I’m rapidly climbing to a precipice I didn’t want to reach yet, which is mind boggling considering this is the most lazy, understated sex I’ve ever had.

But I think it’s making me harder than I’ve ever been. Being joined, touching each other with no urgency, has tension steadily mounting in my groin, so even though I’m not trying to reach the finish, I might get there.

“Leanbh,” I moan as those magic fingers stroke my length. Once again, I don’t know if I’m asking for more or more of the same, I just can’t stay silent while I’m hovering in such a blissful state.

“What do you need?”

I love that he asks. Love that he’s so willing to give. I only wish I knew what I wanted.

“Is my dick making you feel good Maoin?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Do you need me to make yours feel good?” No sooner are the words out of his mouth than I realize that’s what I want. Right now, I’m full but also incomplete, something he seemed to sense even before I did.

God, I love this man.

“Yes, Leanbh. I need that.”

Aiden fists my cock, his firm grip completing the circle that will truly make us one, and I let out the most carnal moan I’ve ever uttered.

The friction on my shaft is an instant trigger to move, and my hips punch forward without warning, each push spearing my dick through his fist as I clench down on his length.

“Oh God. Oh fuck.” Aiden’s head thrashes on the cushion as his pelvis jolts upward, chasing the tight confines of my channel.

He links the fingers of his left hand with mine as his right constricts around my shaft, the lube he put there earlier making it possible for me to fuck his fist with reckless abandon.

“Make me yours Leanbh,” I cry as I thrust, pounding into his hand as I contract around his shaft.

With my final permission, or command, Aiden combusts, his warm release filling me so fast and so hard my body can’t contain it, and he spills over my balls and down my thighs. The mental image of that tips me over, and I join him, ropes of cum painting his smooth, beautiful chest as I quiver around the length buried deep inside me.

The aftershocks are immediate and intense, rolling through us for what feels like minutes even though it’s probably seconds. Regardless, our sated bodies are too tired to move other than Aiden’s valiant attempt to shift us lengthwise so we can stretch our cramping limbs without having to separate.

“Can you feel my heart trying to beat out of my chest?” he asks, just like he did that first time.

“Can you feel mine?”

“It feels like they’re in sync.” I hear the smile in his voice and grin myself.

“It does.”

“Are they really, or am I just being sappy?”

I pick my head off his chest long enough to give him a sweet, gentle kiss. “I think they really are, Leanbh. Just like everything else about us.”

After a quick shower and an overcooked dinner, my handsome man falls asleep in my arms, right where I want him to be, always. This time, he’s still in my bed the next morning. With my cock in his mouth.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Aiden

“Is this what I missed out on when you snuck out of my room?” Kier rasps when he finally wakes up.

I pull off his dick with a pop that echoes around the room. “Hard to say. I probably would’ve wanted to do it but been too nervous.” I dive back in.

“You always wake up horny?”

I shake my head while sucking.

“You planning to fuck me? You better get to it if you are.”

I shake my head again.

“You want me to stop talking?”

I bob my head.

It only takes another minute—I’ve been blowing him for several already so I could wake him up in the best possible way—and he’s shooting down my throat. When he’s spent I crawl up his body, give myself a few vigorous pumps, and spill all over his chest.

Who knew giving blow jobs could be such a turn on.

“Be right back.” I hop off the bed to grab a washcloth and clean him up, letting the damp towel fall to the floor as I

spread out on top of him like an Aiden blanket. “Good morning.” I give him a tiny peck on the lips.

“Yes, it is.”

“I was hoping you’d like my alarm.”

“That’s not what makes this a good morning. It didn’t hurt,” he rushes to add. “Just you being here is all I want.”

He already said he loves me and he’s still saying shit that makes me swoon.

“What should we do today?” I waggle my eyebrows.

“Get dressed.” He pats me on the butt, though instead of nudging me off him he lets his hand linger there.

“Really?” I wrinkle my nose. “I didn’t bring any clothes.”

“You’re here for the weekend and didn’t bring any clothes?” Kier lifts his brows as he looks down his nose at me, not in a reprimand, though it does feel a little like he’s not sure what to make of me right now.

“I assumed we’d be naked all weekend.” I defend my lack of an overnight bag. “Do we really need clothes?”

“Yes. I have a feeling you won’t keep your hands off me without them.”

“Says the man with his hands on my ass. Besides, I thought you liked my hands on you?”

“I love your hands on me, but my dick needs a rest period from time to time.” He gives my backside a little squeeze. “We’re about the same size, I’ll give you something of mine.”

Five minutes—and a pair of navy sweats with a white t-shirt later—I’m sitting at the table while Kier makes coffee, watching him move about with the same catlike grace he has when he’s in his element. Giving lectures on stage, bustling around the lab... *his element must be everywhere*. I like my own private showing though.

“Have you told your parents you’re going into business after graduation?” he asks as he pours the grounds.

“No.”

“Have you told them about me?” He glances at me over his shoulder.

“No. I did tell Conor though.” *Kier Caldwell in sweats and a t-shirt is positively sinful. Look at the way those sweats hug his ass.*

“Who?”

“My brother-in-law.” *I just want to spread those cheeks and bury my face in it.*

“So, that’s where my boyfriend’s name came from.” He chuckles. “I wondered.”

“What boyfriend?” *Boyfriend?*

“Stop ogling my ass. The boyfriend you gave me so Daniel would stop texting me.”

“It’s a gorgeous ass. And that worked, didn’t it. I don’t hear your phone going off nearly as much.”

“He doesn’t text as much, no. He does ask how Conor is doing and when he gets to meet the guy.”

“You can break up.” I lift a nonchalant shoulder as I grab one of the croissants he set on the table. “Tell Daniel the distance was too much but you’re sad and not ready for anything else.”

“One lie is plenty, I think.” He pours a mug and holds it up to me, but I shake my head, so he puts the pot away and joins me. “So, you told your brother-in-law about me but not your parents.”

“Did you tell your parents about me?”

Kier pauses with the coffee about an inch from his mouth. “No.”

“Why not?”

“I figured it would go over better if you weren’t a student at the university where I teach when I tell them I’m dating a man ten years younger.”

“Same.”

“Why’d you tell Conor?”

“He doesn’t lecture. Well, he does, but not as much. Plus, he gets it. He and my sister met and were married within a year, so he’s not freaked out the same way my parents would be—were—with them.”

“And what did Conor say?” Kier sips his coffee.

“The dude abides.”

“Seriously?” Kier reaches for a croissant.

I just shrug.

“Does he always talk in movie quotes?”

“If the quote fits.” I pop a bite in my mouth.

“No wonder you’re so well-versed in movies from my era.”

“Conor’s actually an engineer, very process-oriented in a lot of ways, but he has a silly side and a heart of gold.” I break off another piece of the pastry and chew it thoughtfully before adding. “He asked when he could meet you.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“Graduation. I assume you’ll be there.” I don’t know why I hold my breath—I have zero doubts about Kier or our future together—I think I’m just in the habit of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

First Bennet chooses someone else, then there was finding Kier and knowing we had to say goodbye, followed by finding him again only to have the conflict with Kier working at the university. Even though those things are in the past, it’s hard to believe we’re really in the happily ever after phase when we have several months before things can be official.

“I’d like to be.”

“That’s not a yes.”

Kier reaches across the table to hold my hand. “If I come to graduation, I’d like to be there as your boyfriend, not your

mentor.”

“That’s what I want too.”

“Are you sure?” He brushes his thumb over the back of my knuckles. “Because being there as your boyfriend will raise some eyebrows.”

“Aren’t we ignoring the eyebrows since we’re forming our own company?”

“Yes and no. We aren’t giving people the opportunity to question my recommendation because I won’t write one. But that won’t stop the gossip, and most of that will revolve around whether I’m so enamored with you I’m not thinking clearly.”

“I thought you said anyone who really knows you knows that wouldn’t be the case. And that once they met me, they’d understand.”

“That’s true, but the people who don’t really know me will talk. And while I’m confident people will see your brilliance once they work with you, up until that happens, they may question why I’d give up my job to start a company with you.”

My stomach does an uneasy somersault. “Why are you telling me this?”

“So you can decide what you want people to know and when. I’m established enough that a seemingly uncharacteristic decision will appear strange, and people will quickly shrug it off. You might have to live with the stigma a little longer. I’ll do everything in my power to prevent that, but I want you to be prepared for that possibility. That’s why it needs to be your decision whether I come to graduation or not.”

I start to shake my head. “I don’t want us to hide any longer than we have to.”

“I don’t either, Leanbh. But I don’t want you to make a rash decision. I’ll be part of your future no matter what, so if you want time to establish yourself in the field before we go public in order to avoid any potential scrutiny, I have no problem

with that. I'll just skip the graduation ceremony and meet your family afterward. Think about it, okay." He squeezes my hand.

My first instinct is to say I want him there no matter what, but a part of me hears what he's trying to say. I've busted my ass to earn my reputation as the top student in my class, and even though I achieved that prior to Kier's arrival, people are likely to forget that if there's even the slightest appearance of a scandal. Their minds will jump to a salacious scenario, even if we can prove I didn't benefit from our relationship, simply because our time at this school overlaps by a year.

"Okay." I nod. "I'll think about it."

"So, where were you this weekend?" Damien has the audacity to feign innocence when I get home Sunday night.

"I'm sure you can figure that out." I head to the fridge to grab a Gatorade, just to give myself something to do.

"I could, but I bet it'd be a lot more satisfying if you just tell me. Secret boyfriend to secret boyfriend, you can spill the tea."

"Don't you have enough sex on your own without having to use my relationship for inspiration?"

"So you're having sex again. Good for you."

"Does Bennet's no sex outside the bedroom rule apply to talking about sex? If not, it should. Where is he anyway?" I try to peek into the living room to see if he might save me from this line of questioning.

"He's sleeping off the blow job I gave him." Bennet stuffs some sort of gooey concoction in his mouth. *Must be a cheat day.*

"Who's sleeping off a blow job?" Jagger asks.

"Bennet," Damien says.

"Oh, I thought maybe we were talking about Aiden's man. When do we finally get to meet him?"

"You told?" I accuse Damien, feeling myself go pale.

“To be fair, we said your secret would stay in the house, not with me and Bennet. But no, I didn’t tell.”

“How do you know there’s a man?” I ask Jagger.

“You’re never here, and you can’t study that much.” He shrugs and grabs the Gatorade from me.

“Hey,” I protest, even though I didn’t really want it.

“Blue is Cam’s favorite flavor, and I’m supposed to be getting him a drink after I—”

“Don’t say it,” I try to head him off since I know *fucked his face* is how that sentence ends.

Jagger shrugs. “So, who’s the guy and when do we meet him?”

Damien looks at me, imploring, and I wave my hand in a *go ahead* motion.

“Aiden met a super-hot science guy and hooked up with him last year, and now that guy is a teacher here. Not *his* teacher, but they sort of work together so it’s very hush hush until after graduation.”

That... was actually a really good explanation.

Jagger’s eyes travel over me, appraising. “I didn’t know you had it in you. *Nice.*”

“Had what in me?”

“Seducing an older man. How much older are we talking about here?”

“Ten years,” I mumble.

“Do you call him Daddy?” Jagger asks.

“Eew, no,” I answer as Damien says, *I was just gonna ask that*, and fist bumps Jagger.

“I’d call an older man daddy,” Damien says.

“TMI,” I tell him, but he shrugs dismissively. Apparently, his lack of a filter knows no bounds.

“So, back to the important stuff. When do we meet him?” Jagger asks.

“You don’t. Not until after graduation because while it’s not technically against the rules it does sort of look that way so we’re not saying anything.”

“You’re giving the milk away for free then.” Jagger shakes his head.

“I... what?”

“It means fucking without a commitment,” Damien clarifies most unhelpfully.

“I know what it means, why would you say that?” I ask Jagger.

“This twink on YouTube says that when people send him messages asking to hook up.”

“You watch a twink on YouTube?” I balk, because Jagger and twinks are... it just doesn’t compute.

“He’s got a ton of followers, so I was looking for ideas. Plus, he’s funny as shit.”

Jagger gets quite a bit of NIL money from a few companies that sponsor him in exchange for posting videos about their products, so looking for pointers from other successful influencers makes sense. Still, he’s wrong.

“I’m not giving anything away for free. Kier and I are forming a company together that we’ll both work at after I graduate.”

Jagger whistles approvingly. “Smart. Lock him down. That’s —” Jagger looks at the drink in his hand. “Gotta go.”

He dashes off to the stairs as Damien says, “Ten bucks he’s got Cam tied down up there.”

“I’m not taking a losing bet.”

He nods like he expected that. “So, where’d we land on spilling the tea?”

“I think I liked it better when you and Bennet were rivals and most of our conversations were about how to get along with him,” I mutter.

“I’m just saying you don’t need to be shy about this shit.”

“I’m not being shy, I’m... Okay, fine. I was at Kier’s all weekend, as you know, but what happens between us is just for us. It’s... ours.”

“Fair enough,” Damien agrees. “Wanna see my COC? I’ve been playing it after Bennet passes out post-sex, so I’ve got a ton of gems.” Anticipating my response, he reaches for his phone.

“Yeah, Damien. Show me your clan.”

He’s a fucking handful, but he’s perfect for Bennet. I’m glad they found each other.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kier

MARCH

“What’s next?” Aiden asks me as he stirs diced tomato, olive oil and a bunch of seasonings in a bowl while I brown some chicken.

We’re attempting to make chicken bruschetta, one of the twenty-four easiest recipes for beginners, so we don’t have to order in all the time or feed ourselves from a meal kit. Jury’s out on whether this will be better than the meal kits—I prefer when the ingredients come to my door instead of having to get them at the grocery, but so far it smells good.

I check the recipe. “Spoon the topping onto the chicken, sprinkle parmesan on top, and we cook it until the internal temperature reaches one-sixty-five.”

“This isn’t terrible,” Aiden remarks as he covers the chicken with the tomato topping. “When you said we should figure out how to cook I was a little worried, but I don’t hate this. It’s easier than the house mom makes it look.”

“The house mom?”

“Yeah, the woman who cooks for the fraternity. She feeds dozens of us and the kitchen always looks like a war zone when she’s done.” He swivels his head to check out the

damage we've done, which isn't much. "We've barely even spilled anything."

"I thought you lived with three other couples?"

"I do, but I grab dinner at the fraternity house most nights. It's easier than feeding myself. Plus, my roommates are all athletes so they're uber strict about their diets and I like my food to have flavor."

"You never told me you were in a fraternity." I put the pan under the broiler like the recipe instructs to brown the cheese.

Aiden nods absently. "Joined freshman year. My dad was a legacy and wanted me to follow in his footsteps so to speak. Same with Bennet. That's how we met. Neither of us was interested but felt obligated to make our dads proud. It ended up being a much better experience than I expected though."

"How so?"

"Well, they're cool with a gay nerd, for one. They throw some good parties, and the house mom feeds us really well."

I pull the pan out and add a piece of chicken to the plates Aiden hands me. "When was the last time you went to one of those parties?"

Aiden shrugs and carries the plates to the table while I grab the wine. "Beginning of fall semester maybe?"

Beginning of... That's close to six months ago. It's his senior year and instead of living it up he's playing house with his older boyfriend.

"Leanbh, you shouldn't be missing parties with your friends to hang out with me."

"I don't feel like I'm missing them." He cuts into his meal. "And before you get the wrong idea, that has nothing to do with you. I was getting tired of cheap beer and loud music almost a full year before you showed up. Besides, I see a lot of the guys when I stop for dinner, so it's not like I've gone into hiding."

"What about your roommates? When do you hang out with them?"

“We all went to see Liam’s lacrosse game two days ago.” He pops a bite into his mouth and *mms*. “This is really good.”

I take my own bite—it really isn’t bad—but I can’t fully enjoy our accomplishment since I’m worried about what he’s missing by spending all his time with me.

“Remember what I said about me being here no matter what?” He eyes me curiously but at least nods his head, so I continue. “We have our whole lives to make dinner together and spend our nights on the couch. You only have a few more months to enjoy the life you’ve built at school. Don’t miss out on them to start the rest of your life early.”

“What did you do your senior year of college?” He chews another bite.

“Studied. Drank too much. Had more sex than I should’ve, and just tried to enjoy my last carefree months before I had to become an adult.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing, minus the too much drinking part.” He sips his wine and adds, “And maybe the sex part because I don’t think we’re having too much of that.”

“Leanbh, you’re spending all your weekends inside this house.” I gesture to the walls surrounding us. “That’s no way to enjoy your senior year.”

“Actually, I was thinking I might spend all of next week here, since it’s spring break.”

God, he’s incorrigible.

“You should be taking a trip. I bet your roommates are all doing something.”

“They’re going snowboarding.” He takes another bite.

“Have you even done that at all this year?” When he shakes his head I say, “You should go with them?”

“I *live* with them. You think I want to spend a week in a house with three horny couples that won’t have any classes or practice to give me any peace? Besides, I’d rather not be the lone single guy on vacation.”

“Wouldn’t you enjoy the chance to go snowboarding?”

Aiden’s eyes narrow somewhat playfully, though there’s a hint of unease in his gaze. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“Of course not. I just don’t want you to look back on this time and think you missed out on things to be with me when I’m the one who will be there the rest of your life.”

I really do hate the idea of a week without him, but it’s selfish of me to monopolize this time in his life. I’m doing the right thing by trying to get him to enjoy these last few months with his friends.

“What if you came with me?”

I pound my chest to dislodge the bite that gets stuck there. “What?” Reaching for my wine to wash it down I rasp, “I can’t vacation with a bunch of students.”

“They aren’t *your* students.” Aiden bites his lip. *Little minx—she knows what that does to me.*

“I don’t even know how to snowboard.” I shake my head.

“I’ll teach you.”

“What if someone we know recognizes me?”

“You’re so averse to the cold you’ll be unrecognizably bundled. And we won’t leave the house except to go to the mountain.”

There’s a spark in Aiden’s eyes I don’t want to be responsible for snuffing out, so even though it goes against all common sense I find myself asking, “When do we leave?”

My stomach pitches violently as I stand at the top of the hill looking down, but I don’t think it’s the slope of the hill that has me so worked up.

It’s actually not that steep—the sledding hill might have been worse—so my trepidation isn’t about careening down the hill out of control. It’s about making a fool of myself in front of Aiden’s friends, all of whom are here to *help* me down the hill.

It's not that I don't appreciate their willingness to be here when they could be on more advanced terrain, but learning a sport in front of accomplished athletes is a little daunting. At least they all seem like decent, if slightly immature, guys.

"I hope you took a piss already, because it's gonna take you thirty minutes at least to find your dick under all those layers," Jagger cackles.

"Can you even lower your arms?" Cam chimes in.

"I can feel them, so no frostbite," I justify my oversized coat.

"I actually think it's pretty toasty, and I'm from Arizona," Liam says.

At least they're treating me like one of them.

"Did we decide which foot you lead with when we set up your bindings?" Aiden asks as he sets my board on the ground.

Back at the house they had me stand on the board to get the straps over my boots positioned—something about making sure I had the right center of gravity—but no one said anything about leading feet.

"I don't know what that means," I tell him.

"Which foot do you want in the front?" he clarifies.

"Which foot do you have in front?"

"It doesn't work like that," Cam says. "You have to lead with the foot that feels natural to you."

"How do I know what that is?"

A firm shove from behind has me pitching forward so I have to take a step to avoid falling.

"Left foot," Jagger declares, probably because that's the foot that broke my fall.

"You could've warned him, Kitcat," Cam tells his boyfriend, using some nickname Aiden tells me has a top secret meaning. I assume the guy just has a weakness for the candy bar.

“Warnings defeat the purpose of acting on instinct,” Liam says.

“Exactly,” Jagger agrees.

Aiden gives me an apologetic look from under his helmet and kneels before me to help me get my feet in. When his are similarly positioned he reminds me of the pointers we went over on the gondola on the way up.

“Your front leg does the steering, back controls speed. Keep your weight over the front.”

I lean forward in what’s supposed to be a lunge but isn’t really since both feet are strapped to the board. Before I even move an inch, Aiden is guiding me to stand upright.

“Don’t lean so much, just try to carry your weight on your front leg.”

“How do I do that without leaning?” I ask.

“Pretend like you’re standing on one leg,” Cruz says. I open my mouth to object—I can’t pretend to do that if they’re both strapped down—but he cuts me off. “Don’t compensate by leaning forward, just give that leg your weight. That’ll increase the pressure on the front of the board and gravity will do the rest.”

Despite being mostly vertical, I do slide forward a bit.

A chorus of *nice* and *good job* echoes around me, but it’s Aiden’s *that’s it, Maoin* that means the most.

As we come to the section of the hill where the slope increases, Aiden instructs me to stop. “Remember to keep your weight forward. If you lean back, you’ll pick up speed.”

“*When* that happens,” Jagger says, “because it will. Try to center your weight and rock back on your heels. It’s like putting on the brake.”

I get going again, and for a few seconds everything is great. I feel stable, I’m coasting along nicely, and it’s actually fun. Then suddenly I’m going a little too fast for comfort, so I rock back on my heels, turn somewhat left and end up on my ass.

Aiden glides up beside me and drops to his knees. “Are you okay?”

“Tell me again why I couldn’t stay at the house with Damien?” He’s the only other person in the group that’s never done this, but he got a free pass since he doesn’t want to get injured before the draft.

“Bennet’s there.” I turn to see Liam over my left shoulder.

“So?”

“So, they’re probably taking advantage of an empty house.” I turn to see Cam over my right shoulder.

“Ah,” I say.

“Okay, let’s go again.” Aiden pulls me to standing with the help of a push from Cam so I can give it another go. And promptly fall.

“This is futile,” I grumble as the group helps me to stand.

“I have an idea.” Cruz hops on his board until he’s standing directly in front of me, hands outstretched.

Glancing nervously at his boyfriend, Liam, I ask, “Do you know what this is about?”

“I have a guess,” he answers.

Figuring that’s as good as permission, I put my hands in Cruz’s.

“I ride with my right foot in front, so we’re like a mirror, and I’m strong enough to keep you under control. I’ll help you get a feel for how to ride.”

With Cruz to control our speed and guiding the motion of our turns, we make it the rest of the way down the hill without stopping. And I have to admit, Aiden was right. Once you get moving you don’t notice the cold.

I take another run with Cruz, who’s strength helps counter my lack of skill, and for my final run of the day Aiden takes his place, which is a little less productive since he’s not strong enough to muscle me into position, but just as fun since it’s the two of us together.

Later, when we're all melting into the couches since we're too sore for much else, Aiden tucks himself into my side, snuggling against me the way all the other couples are positioned. I can't help but recall how he once mentioned living with three happy couples, and being surrounded by all this affection when he's been alone must have been so depressing. It makes me a little relieved that a condition of him coming on this trip was that I join him, so that he's not left out of these moments.

I kiss the top of his head, just because I can.

"I'm just saying, Kier survived and he's old enough to be Aiden's dad," Jagger tells Damien from his spot on Cam's lap.

"Hey," Aiden objects. "Ten years is not old enough to be my dad."

Jagger gives him a dismissive wave. "You know what I mean." He turns back to Damien. "You're missing out."

"Better he miss out on snowboarding than a career." Bennet rolls his eyes at Jagger.

"I do both," Jagger says.

"Because you've been boarding your whole life," Bennet retorts.

"If you go pro a team might have a clause in your contract that you can't do things that bring unnecessary risk." Cam kisses the back of Jagger's neck.

"So I'll stick to black diamond instead of double black diamond," Jagger rationalizes.

"And when you break a leg?" Bennet prompts.

"Liam will bandage me up and Cam will get me back in playing shape," he says.

"Liam is pre-med, and Cam is physical therapy," Aiden whispers in my ear.

"That's not the kind of medicine I want to practice." Liam tells Jagger.

“Yeah, but don’t you have to learn the basics? Setting bones seems like it would be pretty basic.” Jagger says.

“Only if you’re lucky,” Damien says. “My teammate broke his leg in a game once; guy hasn’t walked right since.”

“Maybe a bunch of athletes wanting to go pro shouldn’t talk about broken bones,” Cruz says with a visible shudder.

There’s a chorus of *yeahs*.

“Where are you hoping to get drafted?” I ask Damien. Apparently, he’s the only one trying to go pro this year. Jagger and Cruz will try for next.

“It’s not so much where as when. I’d like to go early,” he answers.

“Yeah, but if you go early you go to a shit team,” Bennet says.

“Maybe they’ll be better with me on it,” Damien says, and it’s so genuine I think he believes it.

“Damien’s a perpetual glass half full guy,” Aiden whispers.

“That’s the spirit babe.” Bennet pats Damien’s leg but rolls his eyes when Damien can’t see.

“I felt that,” Damien says.

“That supportive pat on the knee. I would hope so.” Bennet feigns ignorance.

“I don’t care what kind of team the early picks go to. Early means you’re one of the best, so I’d rather go early,” Jagger says.

“Me, too,” Cruz agrees.

“You play too, right?” I ask Cam. “Why aren’t you going pro?”

“Don’t want to be split up from Jagger.”

“We’re ridiculously codependent.” Jagger draws a line between the two of them.

“Is that good or bad?” I’m genuinely curious, since I know some people will think I’ve developed an unhealthy

attachment to Aiden when they learn about us, and I'd like to be armed with a credible response.

"It works for us," Jagger says.

That's... a brilliant answer. I'm going to steal it.

"So, is Aiden going to be a co-CEO of this company you're building?" Liam asks.

I've learned that while the residents of Aiden's house keep each other's secrets, there aren't any secrets between residents. Not anymore.

"We haven't talked about titles. What do you want yours to be, Leanbh?"

"Do consulting firms have partners like law firms? If they do, he could be your partner and your partner." Damien beams.

Glass half full. I see it.

"Do you like that idea?" I ask Aiden.

He stops himself just before biting down on that full lower lip, leaving my dignity intact. "Yes, I do. That way we don't have to specify if we're talking about work or not, we can just be partners."

"Perfect." I kiss those gorgeous lips and excuse myself to use the restroom, running into Bennet when I come out. I try to sidestep so he can use the facilities, but he stops me with a hand to the chest.

"You're good for him," he says as he drops his hand. "I wasn't sure at first, the whole working for you thing, but I see it."

"Thank you," I reply, since I'm not sure what else to say to that.

"He's going to have it rough, isn't he?" Bennet's brow furrows. "When this all comes out, peoples' first instinct will be to think he's riding your success? That he earned it in the bedroom and not the lab?"

"That's my fear, yes."

“Is there any way to stop it? He’s too brilliant to get caught up in that crap.”

“I’m not sure we can stop it, but I’m going to do everything I can to minimize it. And since he is brilliant, I know people will eventually see that.”

“How long will that take?” Bennet presses his lips into a firm line.

“I don’t know. But while I may have the experience, he’s my intellectual equal. Once people see us work together, the way we can bounce things off one another, the talk will shift toward what an asset he is. As soon as we have clients, we’ll start to make the case that he earned the role in the lab.”

“I worry about him, you know.” Bennet turns toward the living room we can just barely see from where we’re standing in the hall. “He just feels everything so deeply.”

Bennet’s not wrong, though I do find it ironic he’s aware of that particular trait while being completely oblivious to Aiden’s prior feelings for him. I know he means well though, so I don’t say anything.

“That’s one of the reasons I love him. But he’s stronger than he looks, and he’s not going to let anyone else’s opinions stop him from leading the life he wants.”

Bennet nods and sticks out his hand. “That’s what I wanted to hear. Thanks.”

I shake it, feeling oddly relieved. I was never concerned about getting Bennet’s approval, but I’m glad to have it all the same.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Aiden

APRIL

Kier's breathing is slow and steady in the dim morning light, his face tranquil. Despite seeing this view every weekend for the last several months, I'm still in awe of it. Still in awe that I get to call this beautiful man mine.

Forever.

Is this really my life? Am I really about to graduate and go into business with a giant in the field who also happens to be my boyfriend? Disney never led me to believe things like this could happen to a man, yet it sure feels like I'm living out one of their films.

I'm struck with the sudden urge to do something to show Kier how much I appreciate him. How grateful I am for everything he's given me, including him.

Breakfast.

As stealthily as possible, I extricate myself from his hold, grab my boxers off the floor and slip into the bathroom. Just as I'm finishing brushing my teeth, two arms snake around my waist from behind as his sleep-rumpled form appears behind me in the mirror.

“Why are you not in my bed?” He nuzzles my neck, his minty breath drifting over my skin. *It’s adorable how he pops one of the mints on his nightstand every morning before kissing me.*

“I wanted to make you breakfast.”

His fingertips skirt over my hipbones and the muscles on my lower abdomen, a barely there touch that’s both innocent and sensual. “You’re what I want for breakfast.”

“You had me for dessert last night.”

“No, you had me.” Kier’s lips tease the spot where my neck meets my ear. “Now it’s my turn.”

Those mischievous fingers drift up to my nipples, giving each of them a slight pinch that has me groaning softly, among other things.

“I saw that.” Kier kisses the back of my neck, sending a shiver along my spine.

“Saw what?” My voice is embarrassingly breathy.

“Your cock twitch.” He squeezes a nipple again, and the fabric covering my dick moves as it reacts to his touch. “Let’s lose these.” His hands slide down my side, slip under the waistband of my boxers, and push them off my hips.

My fully awake cock springs up to slap my stomach as he frees it, and I shiver again as I watch his hungry eyes track the movement.

“That’s better.” He plucks my nipples, and my dick bobs obediently, as if answering his call.

My right hand finds the back of his head as his lips rove over my collarbone, his silky hair sliding through my fingertips as they clutch him to me.

“Love this beautiful cock of yours,” Kier mumbles as he continues to tease it without ever touching it. “How pink and smooth it is. How long and thick. And how it twitches when it wants my attention.” He draws circles around my nipples and gives them a firm pinch, watching in the mirror as my dick lurches in search of friction.

“Maoin,” I hum contentedly.

“That’s right, Leanbh. I’m yours.” He drags his hands down my torso, skirting over my hipbones to the top of my thighs and back again, studiously avoiding my shaft, which continues to strain for his touch.

Kier ignores it, with his hands anyway, which roam to my back and down my spine to knead my cheeks. His eyes remain glued to it, as if cataloging how it responds to the way he works my body.

Spoiler alert, it doesn’t matter how he touches me, my dick reacts.

One of those magic hands slides from my ass to cup my balls, rolling them around his palm and giving them the occasional tug. Sparks ping pong throughout my body as he massages my sac, and I find myself rocking my hips forward slightly to encourage the pull, that delicious tension a mini explosion of pleasure I feel all the way in my toes.

“Look at how sexy you are,” Kier whispers in my ear. “See how beautifully you move for me. The way your body moves under my hands.” One of said hands teases over the planes of my abs. “So desperate for me. Sinful.”

He’s right—not that I’m sexy or sinful per se—but that I’m desperate for his touch. I never seem to get tired of it. In fact, the more he gives me, the more I seem to want.

From that very first night, he seemed to glean how much I wanted to be touched, to be spoiled, and he makes a point to give me that. Even when I top, which is most of the time since that’s a more natural role for me, I don’t always want to take the lead. I’ve never specifically said that, but Kier senses it, and takes every opportunity to make me feel as treasured as I hope he feels in return.

Using a slight hand, he caresses me all over. Fingers trace around my nipples, under my pecs, down my obliques, leaving a trail of ecstasy in their wake. My feet may be planted on the floor, but I’m aroused to the point of weightlessness under his tender ministrations. It’s as if the only thing holding me to the

earth is Kier's hands, and the pleasure they elicit as they travel every inch of my exposed skin.

"Love how you're both hard and smooth." He sucks my collarbone hard enough to leave a mark. "And how your skin turns nice and pink for me." I feel a gentle kiss cover the bruise he left.

"I love your hands on me."

"I know," he whispers as his fingers dip lower, brushing through the hairs at the base of my dick. Predictably, my cock tries to riot with him so close, which makes him chuckle.

"So desperate." He takes it loosely in his fist, giving it a long, leisurely tug.

My head is suddenly too heavy to hold up, falling to rest on his shoulder as I let out a heavy sigh.

I could spend eternity with Kier's hand gently stroking my dick.

"Eyes open, Leanbh. Watch me play with your cock."

Using strength I'm surprised I have in the midst of such pleasure, I pick my head off Kier's shoulder and watch us in the mirror.

The top half of my cock pokes out of his fist, flushed with arousal, while the bottom portion is obscured by the fingers gently massaging it. As he moves his hand forward, the tip gradually disappears, pulling a stilted moan from my throat.

He repeats the motion again, and again, the torturously slow glide of his hand igniting tiny fissures of electricity all along my length. But those fissures are just a tease, coaxing the nerves into awareness without letting the full scope of pleasure take hold. And as much as I love the tender caress, I want more.

My hips alternately press forward, chasing his hand, and push back, rubbing my ass against his full cock.

"Patience, Leanbh." Kier sucks another mark into the base of my neck. "I'll give you what you want when I'm done with this pretty cock."

I know better than to rush my boyfriend—it only makes him toy with me even longer—but I’m used to looking down my body to watch him stroke my dick, and seeing him do it in the mirror is a new level of erotic.

Kier’s right hand continues to wander my body while the left pumps my length, tweaking my nipples, teasing my abs, massaging my sac, all of which have me moaning contentedly. Yet when his finger finds my pucker, that moan turns noticeably more carnal.

“This is what you want?” He nips my earlobe.

“Yes.”

“Me, too. Stay here.”

A tiny mewl passes through my lips as he releases me to grab the lube he keeps in the shower. When he returns he takes my cock in his left hand again while the slick fingers of his right start probing my entrance.

My body jolts, unsure of whether to chase the hand on my dick or the one trying to fill me. Both offer indescribable pleasure, and the sight of my pelvis rocking as my body struggles with which to choose only heightens my arousal.

As he probes further into my channel, it’s a fight to keep from clenching around him. Not to keep him out, but to pull him in. Hold him deeper.

The burn that used to be present every time he entered me is barely there anymore. I’ll feel it when he uses his cock, but even that will pass quickly. I may not bottom as much as he does, but I’ve done it enough that my body knows what’s coming and welcomes it.

I battle to hold my eyes open as he pushes deeper, rubbing against the delicate tissue that leads to my prostate. He tenderly kneads that spot, sending wave after wave of euphoria shooting throughout my body, and making my cock twitch with need.

My back bows as he probes those delicate nerves, the muscles in my ass seizing up as my knees start to go weak. Reaching behind me, I grab his ass to anchor myself. My head

rocks from side to side as I try to keep my gaze on the two of us in the mirror, hedonistically pushing my dick into his fist as he fingers me.

Kier adds a second digit, and I watch my eyes flutter as another wave of nirvana overtakes me. A slight sheen of sweat makes my torso glisten in the harsh light of the room, giving my skin an ethereal quality.

I've never felt so sexy.

Or debauched.

My chest heaves as Kier nuzzles along my neck, the rise and fall of matching the pace of the hand stroking my dick. Lips pink and parted, eyelids hooded with lust.

It's like we're the stars of our own private movie, and while surges of pleasure threaten to make my eyes shut of their own accord, during the moments in between I can't take them off the two of us, and the sensual picture we make.

How is this my life?

Without warning Kier pulls away, and I'm empty. Another mewl passes from my throat.

"So hungry for my cock, Leanbh." I hear the squelch of the lube as he coats his length and lift my eyes off my gyrating pelvis to find his gaze in the mirror.

Holy shit he's beautiful.

Dark hair sinfully disheveled. Cheeks flushed with desire. Eyes hungry. *For me.*

I'm suddenly overcome with the need to taste him. To feel connected in every possible way. Turning my head to the left I seek out his lips, which meet mine in a kiss that starts as desperate and quickly morphs to tender, as if once we finally make contact our souls are content.

A soft growl rumbles up Kier's throat as we hover together, breathing one another's air. And we stay that way as he pushes inside, joining us completely.

My breath catches in my lungs as he enters me, the pleasure and pain mixing together to block out everything but the sensation of having my Maoin inside my body. Of feeling his arousal, and his love, and knowing I'm the reason for it.

The intensity of the moment very nearly tips me over the edge, and it's only because I'm not breathing that I'm able to stave off the tremors of release.

Toes curling and cramping, I tamp down the urge to let go by focusing on the sensation of Kier's soft lips pressing against mine. They anchor me enough to take a cautious breath, and my body slowly returns to Earth before I have to resort to counting.

Behind me, Kier shudders. "Okay?" he whispers against my mouth.

"Mmm."

His tongue brushes softly along mine as he swivels his hips almost imperceptibly, testing my readiness. I clench in response, involuntarily, but the needy moan that accompanies it assures him he doesn't need to wait any longer.

Sparks erupt along my channel as he pulls back, igniting anew when he pushes forward. And when his crown rubs against my prostate they combust in an explosion of bliss that has my cock twitching greedily.

The hands still clenching Kier's ass flex as he leisurely spears his length inside me in a rhythm that matches the swipe of his tongue along mine.

Though no words are spoken, I hear what he's saying all the same.

I want you.

I need you.

I love you.

As always seems to happen when we're together, my heart is just as aroused as my body, building toward a release that's as emotional as it is physical. We might be the epitome of obscene right now, positioned so we can watch ourselves fuck,

but there's an intimacy to this carnal display that resonates deep in my soul.

I think it's the fact I can be both physically and emotionally exposed yet completely comfortable that makes my chest ache in the best possible way. As if my heart is so full my body can't contain it, yet being joined to Kier means he'll keep me whole.

Protected.

Loved.

Before I met him, thoughts like that would've made me question what was wrong with me. I didn't think that level of sentiment could exist with the physical act of sex. Now, I can't imagine it any other way.

Kier breaks our kiss with a grunt, eyes drifting to the mirror, where he's got the perfect view of my dick bobbing freely. My gaze follows his, and I have to admit it's a heady sight. Seeing myself so flushed and hard, and the near feral expression it puts on his face, makes me even more desperate for release.

"More." I plead breathlessly.

Kier's right hand makes its way to my cock while the left finds my balls. Using his forearms to hold me to him, his hips start to punch forward at a pace that has his fist meeting the base of my dick each time he bottoms out, all the while that left hand massages my sac. The mix of prodding and pulling and rubbing is so overwhelming my body doesn't know what to focus on, and I can do little more than hold on as he has his way with me.

Near feral moans erupt from my throat as my body climbs higher and higher into the clouds. My vision goes hazy as my muscles cramp from the effort of trying to hold myself upright long enough to realize the nirvana he's taking me to.

"Yes, Kier. Yes."

"Oh, God, Leanbh. Oh God." His grip tightens around my cock, turning the head a dark purple.

The pleasure becomes so intense I can't fight it anymore, and my ass contracts around Kier's cock as ropes of cum spurt from my slit, coating the mirror in front of me.

Kier thrust a final time and holds still, biting down on my shoulder as his fist continues to slide over my dick, milking me for everything I have to give. My whole body twitches and shakes as the orgasm blasts through me, the euphoria so all-consuming my vision goes white, and I have the sensation of being weightless.

When my vision returns my cock is still pulsing in Kier's fist as his twitches inside me, our mutual release so strong the aftershocks come for what feels like minutes instead of seconds. As they finally recede my body is so sated I'm not entirely sure how it's still upright, but since it's still joined to Kier's I'm determined to stay that way.

"Leanbh." His deep whisper rumbles against my ear.

I don't have the strength to do anything but nod my agreement. Fortunately, Kier seems to have strength enough for the both of us, cupping my chin and turning my face to his for a gentle kiss.

It rejuvenates me enough to bring my eyes to his lovely blue ones, which shine with a mixture of affection and awe. And even though words aren't necessary given what I see in his expression, I say them anyway. "I love you, Maoin."

"I love you too."

After a quick shower to clean up, we finally make our way to the kitchen for some breakfast, which takes far longer to make than it should since we keep stealing kisses. It's odd, this is far from the first time we've made a meal after I've stayed over, but it somehow feels more poignant. Maybe because the school year is almost over, and we're nearly done having to hide. That reminds me...

"I want you at the graduation ceremony," I blurt as we set our plates on the table. "I know you'll be part of my future regardless, but you're part of my present, too. A major part.

And I want to share that with you, even if it means I'll have to work a little harder to prove myself in the field."

"You're sure? You've worked so hard to get where you are, I don't want our relationship to take away from your accomplishments."

"It doesn't. Not to me. I don't care what anyone else thinks. Besides, eventually I'll prove them wrong."

Kier wraps his hand around the back of my head and tugs me to him, so our foreheads are resting together. "Yes, you will, Leanbh. And I have a feeling that won't take as long as you think."

I pull back so I can see his face. "What do you mean?"

"My dad called me this week. The initial test of his new prosthetic was the most promising yet. He hasn't tried to run but feels like he can walk normally. And the doctors who oversaw the test are raving about how well the leg functioned. They're calling it a game changer."

"We did it?" My heartbeat accelerates at the thought of giving Kier's dad a piece of his life he thought was lost.

"It looks that way. And both our names are going on the article we'll publish about our findings, which is an accolade you don't share with people who haven't earned it. Once that's available, it'll speak volumes about your legitimacy in the field. Between that and being my business partner, it won't take long for people to see how brilliant you are." Kier brushes a stubborn lock of hair off my forehead and gives me a lingering kiss. "My dad's already singing your praises."

"Your... *What?! Why would he be singing my praises?*"

"Because I told him my boyfriend is the one who helped me with the research."

It's impossible to keep the giddy smile off my face. "You told your parents about me?"

"Why do you seem surprised?"

"I didn't think you were doing that until after I graduated."

“That was the original plan.” Kier picks my hand off my lap and kisses my knuckles. “But when my dad was raving about how well the leg worked, I couldn’t take all the credit. Plus, I’ve never been so happy, and wanted them to know why.”

“And? Have they thought you lost your mind?”

Kier uses his thumb to pry my bottom lip free. “No, Leanbh. They know I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

I have half a second to decide it’s time to tell my parents about him before Kier’s mouth is on mine, and I forget everything but how much I love him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kier

MAY

“Wear the gray one with the blue shirt.” Aiden snakes his arms around my waist from behind and props his head on my shoulder. “It brings out your eyes.”

“Why are we worrying about what goes with *my* eyes on *your* graduation day?”

“Because when *your* eyes stand out it’s easier to see when they’re on *me*.”

“They’re always on you, Leanbh.” I reach for the suit he picked and start putting it on while he gets dressed in his, a smart tan one with a faint blue pattern he’s accentuating with a blue shirt that matches mine.

“We aren’t too—coordinated—with these shirts?” I look down my torso before looking at his.

“We’re partners.” He shrugs.

“Yes, but I’m meeting your family for the first time, so maybe we should, I don’t know, not look like we got dressed together?”

“They’re just shirts.”

“Identical ones. We bought them together.”

“You know they know I’m sleeping with you, right?” Aiden arches a playful brow. “It sort of came up when I told them instead of applying to grad school I was going into business with my boyfriend.”

“I remember. It was right before they threatened to sue the school for allowing you to have a relationship with your boss.”

That was two weeks ago—Aiden thought we were close enough to graduation to fill his parents in on his future plans without freaking them out—and it’s only because Conor stepped in to explain how we met before I was hired at the school and verified the story by showing them my picture on the book jacket that they relented.

Conor got them to accept that our relationship isn’t breaking any rules, but I’m pretty sure they aren’t sold on the age difference, so I don’t want to rock the boat by broadcasting that their son regularly spends the night.

My boyfriend doesn’t share my opinion.

“Yes, well since I told you I’m not hiding and that includes from my parents. Besides, my dad doesn’t care about fashion and my mom doesn’t see well enough to know what she’s looking at, so I doubt they’ll even notice. How do I look?” He spins to face me.

The tan suit hugs his lean frame perfectly, the earthy tones a perfect complement to his fair hair and amber eyes. The blue shirt softens the strong lines of the jacket, giving him an approachable yet still classic air.

“You’re stunning.” I step to him and cup his face in my hands, gently pressing my lips to his. “Thank you for including me in this day.”

“Thank you for including me in the rest of your life.” He kisses me back, pouring more emotion than should be possible into a simple kiss.

God, I love him.

“I have something for you,” I tell him as we pull apart.

“Really?” He bites his lip, but promptly lets it go with a warning growl from me.

Pulling an envelope from my jacket pocket, I say, “Congratulations, partner.”

Aiden tears open the envelope and unfolds the paper, looking up at me after just a few seconds. “What?” He blinks.

“Our incorporation papers. We’re officially in business. And I reached out to my old company in Boston to let them know I wasn’t returning to teaching, or to my former position, but that my partner and I would be happy to discuss how we might help advance their research.”

“What’d they say?” He holds his breath.

“They weren’t overly thrilled at first, but when I told them my partner is the one who collaborated with me on the new prosthetic everyone’s talking about, they said maybe we should have a meeting.”

Aiden’s jaw drops as he looks between me and the papers in his hand. Then suddenly his brows morph into a frown, and he cocks his head to the side.

“Where’d you get these papers?” he asks.

“My pocket.”

“No, I mean, how’d they get in your pocket. I watched you get dressed, I never saw you put anything in there.”

“That’s because I put them there last night.” I give him a quick kiss. “I knew you’d pick the gray suit.”

Aiden gives me the most heartfelt smile right before he throws his arms around my neck. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Leanbh. Now grab your cap and gown so we can get going. I need all the brownie points I can get with your parents, so I don’t want to be late.”

We hop in my car for the ten-minute drive to campus, arriving in plenty of time to make a good impression.

Several groups of people are mingling about outside the stadium where graduation will take place, and Aiden takes my

hand to steer us toward one that has a little girl running around in circles. She stops cold when she sees us, then sprints our direction with arms flung out wide.

“Uncle A!” she shouts as she launches herself off the ground, Aiden dislodging his hand in just enough time to catch her.

“Hey, princess.” He spins her around once and holds her up to meet me. “This is my niece, Princess Isabella. Princess, this is Kier. My boyfriend.”

“Hello,” I say.

Aiden’s elbow meets my side as he whispers from the corner of his mouth, “Bow.”

I do my best imitation of what I assume to be the proper greeting for royalty—I have no background in such things—and Isabella giggles.

“He looks like a prince,” she says.

“He does,” Aiden agrees, “But he’s mine so you can’t have him.” He sets her down with a little pat on the butt, urging her to go back to her parents, and faces the two people I assume are his.

Aiden’s parents are both gray, so I can’t tell where his hair comes from. The eyes are his father’s, while his complexion looks more like his mother’s. His smile is all his own though. Or maybe that’s just how it looks since both his parents are regarding me cautiously.

“Kier, these are my folks. Robert and Bonnie. Mom, Dad, this is Kier.”

“Hello.” I extend my hand, which they both shake, though neither does anything more than smile and nod. *Guess I’ll take the lead.* “I know you have some trepidation about my relationship with your son, and I respect your concerns. I’d be happy to discuss them with you at a more opportune moment, and I hope in time you’ll see I only have his best interests at heart.”

“Jesus, he sounds just like Aiden,” a burly man says right before a woman smacks him on the chest with the back of her hand.

“That’s not what I sound like,” Aiden says.

“When you’re trying to be formal it is,” the man responds.

Aiden sighs heavily and points at him. “Kier this is Conor and my sister Amanda.”

As I shake their hands Aiden turns back to his parents to give them a hug, and I thank Conor for helping to straighten things out with his in-laws while his wife tries to corral their daughter.

“They’re good people. Just protective,” Conor says.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“It’ll help that you don’t look ten years older.”

“How old do I look?”

He gives me an appraising once-over. “Twenty-eight, tops.”

“Thank you?”

“Don’t mention it. So, who’s your team?”

I recall the first time I met Aiden, and his own inquiry about Irish sports. “Not the Bohemians.”

“Good man.” Conor’s mouth morphs into a wide grin.

“I thought you worked *for* him,” Aiden’s mother’s voice drifts through the air.

“I did, now I work *with* him. In the new company.”

“He hired you?” she asks.

Conor nudges my side. “They’ll get it eventually. They’re just a little shell-shocked that he’d be starting something without entering the workforce first. But Aiden’s intelligence has always opened unexpected doors, so they just need a bit to catch up.”

“No one hired anyone,” Aiden says.

“If I may—” I pull out the incorporation papers I showed Aiden earlier, which I tucked back into my pocket “—we formed the company jointly. Each of us has fifty percent ownership, so we’re partners and colleagues, not manager and employee.”

Aiden slings his arm around my waist and pulls me to him. “See. Equals.”

“But...” Bonnie sputters. “He... he’s only just graduating today. How can he have a company already?”

“Because he’s too brilliant to work for anyone else,” I reply. “And we make a good team.” I put my arm around his shoulder and kiss his temple.

The gesture seems to make Bonnie relax a little, though Aiden’s dad is tougher to read. I don’t get the sense he’s angry so much as just indifferent. Almost like his wife has the worrying under control so he’ll leave her to it. It’s an interesting dynamic, reminding me slightly of my own parents in the sense that my mom is the bigger worrier, but my dad is never indifferent about anything.

To capitalize on this somewhat calm moment, I offer to take pictures of the family, and once Amanda tempts Isabella with a photo shoot the little princess stops running around long enough to smile for the camera. Aiden insists on a couple with the two of us as well, and I proudly sling my arm around my man’s shoulders and hug him to me for a few snaps.

As we’re wrapping up the photos Bennet and Damien find us, so we take another round of pictures with the three graduates. Aiden’s smile is so bright it makes my heart swell, though by now I know him well enough to tell that despite his happiness, he’s also a little sad this chapter of his life is ending.

Damien and Bennet are headed to New York in a few days—Damien was drafted there in the second round—and Bennet plans to work for his father’s finance company remotely. There’s a chance Aiden and I won’t be too far away since several companies we may consult with are located in that part

of the country, but nothing is set, so after today there's no telling when we'll see them again.

Nevertheless, everyone is all smiles as they pose, the joy outweighing the melancholy.

"Party at the frat house tonight. You're coming to the last one, right?" Bennet asks Aiden, who glances at me skeptically.

"It's your night, Leanbh. We'll do whatever you want."

"You mean you'd go to a frat party with me?" He blinks in rapid succession.

"If that's what you want to do, of course."

He gives me a wary smile, "It would be nice to stop by long enough to say goodbye."

"Then that's what we'll do."

"Think you can stay up late enough for a party?" Bennet elbows my arm.

Aiden and I may not focus on our age difference, but the same can't be said for his roommates. They like to tease me about going to bed early, having creaky joints—all things that tend to happen when you try to hurl yourself down a hill on a board for the first time—and question whether I can keep up. They also seem determined to believe Aiden calls me daddy in secret.

"I think I'll give you a run for your money in beer pong," I tell him.

"You?" Bennet gapes at me.

"It's just geometry, and because of my field I happen to be an expert in that."

"How come he's so bad at it then?" Damien inclines his head toward my boyfriend.

"I get nervous under pressure." Aiden gives us a sheepish look.

"I've never seen that," I tell him.

“Academic pressure is different than sports pressure.” He lifts a pouty shoulder. “Plus, computers have a delete button, but once you swing or shoot or whatever there’s no do over.”

“Fair enough.” I sling my arm around his shoulder and pull him to me so I can plant another kiss on his forehead.

Aiden’s mother interrupts the party talk with a reminder that it’s almost time for the ceremony, so everyone starts to file into the stadium, with the students on the field and guests in the stands. Sitting between Conor and Aiden’s dad, I listen as the president of the school and the commencement speaker talk about the school, the graduating class, and how to succeed post-graduation.

The students don’t receive their degrees right now—that happens at a separate event where the students are grouped by college, not class—so instead of having to get through thousands of names the list is whittled down to a few hundred. Once the initial program is finished, students and their families retreat to various buildings around campus for the degree portion of the process, where they’re each called to the stage individually.

Bennet and Damien are in different colleges, so I’m left alone with Aiden’s family, and while they once again invite me to sit with them, I choose to take advantage of one of the perks of being faculty and slip into the wings just off stage. I’m not sure they buy my story that professors have to help with the ceremony, but I figure that’s a better excuse than saying I want to be the first to congratulate my man after he receives his diploma.

The dean of the computer science department gives another overview of what the students had to achieve in order to graduate before he starts reading off names, and since they go in alphabetical order it takes the better part of an hour before they get to Aiden. As his name is called, I see his smiling face rise from the crowd, and I have to bite back a grin of my own as I watch him bounce down the aisle toward the stage.

I stop fighting that grin when he shakes the dean’s hand and takes his diploma, not caring in the least whether anyone sees

how happy I am. How proud. Even if I wasn't in love with him, I'd be in awe of his determination, his unrelenting enthusiasm for the work, and his passion for helping people. A better man doesn't exist, and I'm humbled and honored by the fact *I'm* the one who gets to call him mine.

Aiden doesn't know I'm hiding in the wings, and once he catches sight of me his beaming smile somehow grows even bigger, which makes my heartbeat echo in my chest. His steps quicken until he's within arm's reach, and we fling our arms around each other, holding on so tight there's barely space to breathe.

"I'm so proud of you, Leanbh." I cup his face in my hands and kiss the air from his lungs just as a chorus of gasps sounds to my right.

"Leanbh? *Him?*" Daniel's eyes are as wide as Grace's mouth.

"What are you doing?" She hisses, mercifully missing the fact Daniel knows something she doesn't. "You two can't be involved."

I release Aiden's face and take his hand in mine, linking our fingers. "Why not?"

"You're his professor," she sputters.

"I'm not actually. He's never been in any of my classes, and I've never had input on any of his grades."

"You're still his advisor," Daniel says. "This renders all recommendations from you useless."

"I didn't write him any," I say with more calm than I feel. Even knowing they can't do anything with the knowledge that we're together, I'd rather not get into the whole history of our relationship if I can avoid it, so I try to stick to the basics.

"You didn't... but his future..." Grace blinks furiously. "Anyone worth their salt in this industry will know you two were at Front Range University at the same time, and if he doesn't have a recommendation from you that will reflect poorly on him. How could you do this to him?"

“Ms. Bowers,” Aiden puts a gentle hand on her arm. “I appreciate your concern, truly. But I don’t need Keir’s recommendation. I’m not applying anywhere.”

“You’re not... but what... where are you... what?” Grace looks between Aiden, me and Daniel.

“Aiden and I formed a consulting company together.” I hold up our joined hands as I hand her the incorporation papers I still have in my pocket. “We’re partners in both business and life.”

“But you... he worked for you,” Daniel objects. “Even if you weren’t his professor, it’s unethical for the two of you to be involved.”

I can see the wheels turning in his mind, recalling prior conversations, and even though I firmly believe we’d ultimately be found innocent of any wrongdoing, I’d rather not get bogged down by an invasive investigation if he speculates about our history aloud.

“Under normal circumstances I’d agree with you, Daniel. But Aiden and I actually met, and had a brief relationship, before I came to the university. We didn’t expect to find each other here, and when we did, we realized we wanted to be together. Personally and professionally. That’s why we formed our business, and why I haven’t written him any recommendations.”

“I suppose you haven’t technically broken any rules.” Grace hands the paperwork back to me. “Although it’d certainly have been a lot less messy if you’d just disclosed you knew each other from before.”

“My apologies, Grace. Prior to deciding to form our own company I didn’t want anyone to question Aiden’s brilliance by mistaking my motives.”

She gives me a curt nod, seemingly satisfied I have Aiden’s best interests at heart.

“Texting right under my nose,” Daniel mutters.

“Sorry, Professor.” Aiden blushes adorably, though he doesn’t look away, and I have to bite back a chuckle at his

subtly possessive display. But given that Daniel doesn't respond, I have to conclude my boyfriend was right all along, and that text saved me from a much more awkward conversation.

“Well, this might not be against any rules—” Grace draws a line between me and Aiden “—but I'd advise you to keep your hands off each other on school grounds. At least for the rest of the day.”

“Noted.” I give her a polite nod before turning to Aiden, whose hand I have no intention of letting go. “Should I hand your friends a beer pong loss before they head off to New York?”

“I'd like that, Maoin.”

“What's that Irish for?” Daniel asks.

Aiden stares into my eyes as he gives my fingers a squeeze. “Mine.”

Epilogue - Aiden

FIVE YEARS LATER

“I can’t watch.” I hold my hands over my eyes to block the screen, realizing only then it doesn’t block the sound.

“Hiding your eyes won’t change the outcome.” Kier chuckles beside me.

“Yes, but if I can’t see then I can’t cheer one way or the other.”

Damien and Jagger are competing against each other in the Superbowl, and it’s giving me heart palpitations. No matter what happens one of them will be devastated, and I can’t bear to see that, especially since I’ll be ecstatic for the other. So I’m sitting on the edge of the bed, still in my tux, facing the TV with my hands plastered over my face.

“At least we aren’t there in person. Think of poor Cruz and Liam.”

“I don’t envy them that.” I shudder.

Due to an unfortunate coincidence, the Edison Awards were scheduled at the same time as the Superbowl, and since Kier and I received the award for innovation in medical technology

for our AI-powered prosthetics, we couldn't accept the invitation to attend the game. Initially I was bummed to miss out on the reunion of friends, but now I'm grateful for the excuse not to be there.

And as far as excuses go, there's no better reason to miss the Super Bowl than winning an award for our work.

That's obviously not the main goal, but after everything we've done to get here, it feels good.

Having my name on the article about the research we did for his dad's prosthetic did help speed my acceptance in the field, but it didn't negate the speculation entirely. My age, coupled with the fact that we were personal as well as professional partners, did give some people pause.

For the first two years our only client was the Boston firm Kier worked at prior to coming to Front Range University, and while that was a good arrangement, it wasn't what we envisioned when we formed the company. Sure, we had the resources to continue our work, and we made advancements over and above what we were able to do for Kier's dad. But only that firm took me seriously.

It wasn't until that investor Kier had been talking to pulled together the resources to start his own company that things finally took off. Though we declined the offer to work for him exclusively, we consulted on several projects, and when he raved about us—both of us—more people started to take me seriously.

I'm still one of the youngest experts in the field, but I've earned the respect of my peers, which this award shows.

"Ooh, so close." Kier whistles as the announcer says Jagger made the catch, which I assume means Damien nearly disrupted the play.

I think he's secretly rooting for Damien. Living in Boston means we see them more frequently than Cam and Jagger, who live on the west coast. That, and the fact Damien's married to my best friend, translates into us being closer to our New York neighbors. Not just physically either, we try to get

together at least once a month, so we're just closer to them overall.

But it's not like we don't see everyone else. Once a year we all vacation together to catch up, and since most of us have careers that involve some sort of travel it's not uncommon to find yourself in the same city as someone else. We've all stayed remarkably close over the years, so while we're closest to Damien and Bennet, it's not like we're distant from the rest of the group.

And as far as choosing sides goes, years ago, right before we became roommates, Cam toured the lab I worked at in school, and really made an attempt to learn what it is I do. To this day he makes the best effort of all our friends to understand my work, and because of that I have a soft spot for him. Given that he's Jagger's husband...

I don't want to root for one friend over the other.

"Maybe we should just turn it off," I say. "They won't know if the ceremony ran late and we missed the whole damn thing."

The words are barely out of my mouth when the room suddenly goes silent. "Whatever you want, Leanbh."

"Thank you." I take my hand off my eyes only to have to blink them furiously to bring my boyfriend into focus. "What are you doing?"

"I would hope you know the answer to that," he says from bended knee, holding a velvet box in his hand.

Kier's asked me to marry him twice before, and both times I declined. Not because I don't want to marry him, but because the time wasn't right.

Right after graduation was too soon. We had a business to build, I had a name to make for myself independent of him, and since I knew we'd be together forever I didn't feel the need to rush into marriage. I sort of regret that now, but back then it felt like the right decision, and he went along with it since he knew it'd happen one day.

I'm pretty sure he thought that day would come sooner though. We both did.

The second time was when my father got cancer, and Kier thought we should get married while he was there to see it. But my mother and sister were a mess, which meant Conor and I were stressed and distracted, and it just didn't feel right to celebrate much of anything while my dad was suffering. Fortunately, he's in remission now, though even if he weren't, it's time.

"Third time's the charm?" Kier's nervous smile melts my heart.

"We can go with that." I join him on the floor and pull a tiny box from my breast pocket. "Or we can pretend this is the first and last time either of us has to ask."

My man's eyes are watery when they find mine. "How long have you been planning this?"

"I've been *planning* to marry you since that day I walked into your office and realized you loved me as much as I loved you, even after that one night." Kier's hand is shaking slightly as I put the ring on it. "I've been *plotting* how to propose since the first time I said no."

"You regret that?" He puts a ring on my finger and kisses it as if sealing it in place.

"I never wanted to say no. I just felt like I owed it to myself to start my career with my own name."

"Did you think I'd expect you to take mine?" Kier holds our hands together in his lap, his thumb rubbing gently over mine.

"No. But if we're married that's what I'd want. Whether it's yours, mine or a combination, I'd want us to have the same name."

"I'd like that, Leanbh. Should we stick with what we've already decided on? CalSin?" He references the name of our company.

"That sounds a little official, but it might be easier to say than Caldwell-Sinclair. Although—" I pretend to think about

the options “—keeping both will be like passing down our heritage to our kids.”

“Our kids?” It’s impossible to miss how those two words make his eyes sparkle.

“You’ve always wanted kids, right?” I play coy, knowing full well the thing he wants most in this world now that we’ve given his dad his mobility back is to have little ones running around. “I hope so, because the surrogate agency I’ve been talking to will be—”

“You’ve been talking to a surrogate?”

“An agency that pairs you with surrogates, yes. And—”

Kier smooshes his lips to mine, rambling excitedly between kisses. “I want two. One that looks like you and one that looks like me. And I want them close in age so they’re best friends. And we’ll move outside the city so they have a yard, and we can get them a dog, and—”

“Slow down.” I put my hand on his chest and push him slightly back so I can breathe. “First we have to pick our last name, then you’ve gotta marry me, and then we have to fuck like crazy so we can go through the IVF process.”

I bite the corner of my lip, waiting for him to process everything I’ve just said, and knowing exactly what he’ll say next.

“There’s no reason we can’t practice the fucking part right now, Aiden Caldwell-Sinclair. Get naked.”

This dude abides.

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